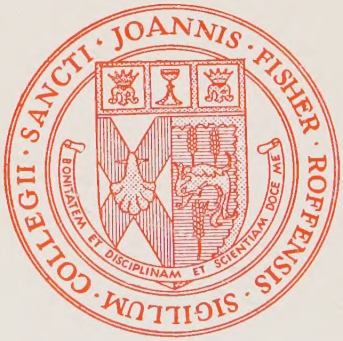

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

AS A CRITIC

BY

JOSEPH J. REILLY

M.A. (COLUMBIA); PH.D. (YALE)

FORMERLY INSTRUCTOR IN ENGLISH AT THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

SOMETIME FELLOW IN ENGLISH AT YALE UNIVERSITY

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To

MY MOTHER

AND THE MEMORY OF

MY FATHER

PREFACE

WITH the steady growth of interest in American literature the position of James Russell Lowell as the greatest of our men of letters has been pretty generally conceded. *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is regarded as a classic and studied in our schools; *The First Snowfall*, *The Dandelion*, *An Incident in a Railroad Car*, typical of Lowell the poet, in his tenderness of sentiment, his appreciation of nature, his didacticism, are household poems among us. That sheaf of essays in lighter mood which numbers *My Garden Acquaintance* and *A Good Word for Winter*, wins for Lowell in many minds a place by the side of Thackeray's "Saint Charles." This same Lowell had thoughtful things to say on public libraries, on democracy, and in the heat of the Civil War many other things to say—some thoughtful, others not. Of his prose his most noteworthy work was devoted to criticism. As a man of letters he was poet, essayist, student of politics, and critic, and on each of these many sides he deserves consideration. His has been regarded as the foremost position

in the history of American criticism and he has been compared, and sometimes without disparagement, to Matthew Arnold. Rarely in a modern-day volume of criticism or literary history does one fail to find an apt quotation from Lowell. Obviously his critical work is known and read. This brilliant versatile Lowell, this college professor, editor, poet, etymologist, diplomat, essayist, student of literature and politics, did not for naught don the robes of critic and adventure to sit in the Siege Perilous amid that circle which numbers in English Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold.

It is the purpose of this study to weigh the merits of Lowell the critic, to consider dispassionately his gifts and equipment, to ascertain if possible his right to a place in the brilliant company of admitted critics.

In these days when criticism is in large measure merely a series of personal impressions, one need not perhaps defend the objective method employed throughout this study. For the conclusions presented here the writer alone is responsible.

To Professor Cook of Yale, at whose suggestion this work was undertaken, my gratitude is due for his unfailing interest and advice, and to Professor Beers of Yale for his kindness on many occasions. I wish to acknowledge my obligations to my sister, Miss Katherine M. Reilly, for patience and care in transcribing, and to Miss Teresa

Ryan, whose aid in reading proof and in preparing the index, has been generously given.

J. J. R.

State House, Boston,
March, 1915.

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LOWELL AS A CRITIC

CHAPTER I

LOWELL: THE MAN AND THE WRITER

THERE was good stock behind Lowell. His great-grandfather and his father were clergymen; his grandfather attained a high position in the judiciary. All three were graduates of Harvard. On his mother's side Lowell was descended from an Orkney family named Spence, whose lineage he liked to trace back to the redoubtable ballad hero, Sir Patrick Spens.

Reverend Charles Lowell, Lowell's father, had been trained for the ministry and had sat under the famous Dugald Stewart. In religion he was an orthodox Congregationalist, but drifted more and more toward Unitarianism with the passing years. As pastor of the West Church in Boston he was zealous in his ministrations to his flock even to the point of impairing his health. He was remarkable in the pulpit for refinement of manner and a certain impressiveness which came not from

originality of thought but from charm of personality and a singularly sweet voice. His son wrote of him in 1844: "My father is one of the men you would like to know. He is Doctor Primrose in the comparative degree, the very simplest and charmingest of sexagenarians, and not without a great deal of the truest magnanimity." Doctor Lowell was not conspicuous for a sense of humor.[1] He felt a deep interest and pride in his son's successes; he thought the reviews of his poems were not laudatory enough, and professed to believe that he could not understand more than a tithe of what young Lowell wrote.

Doctor Lowell had no sympathy with slavery. And yet like many good men of his time, he shrank from the thought of an inevitable conflict. Abolitionism, too often the shibboleth of extremists, repelled him. He was in a word a conservative. The world around him seemed the theatre of much that was harsh and noisy and uncharitable. For his part he had the manifold duties of his parish and the alluring quiet of his library. There he had collected some three or four thousand volumes, among which, however, divinity was by no means paramount. A conservative even in literature, Doctor Lowell owned Pope as his favorite poet.

Lowell's mother was a woman of romantic nature; she was fond of old ballads, which she

[1] *Letters*, i., 82.

often sang at twilight, was an omnivorous reader, and had a taste for languages. She was said to have the faculty of second sight.

James Russell Lowell, born in 1819, was the youngest of six children. He attended a dame's school at Cambridge for the rudiments, and at the age of nine was sent to the classical school kept by William Wells, an excellent Latinist. Among Lowell's schoolmates were Thomas Wentworth Higginson and W. W. Story, the "Edelmann Storg" of *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*, and *Leaves from my Journal*. Story became his intimate, with whom he read Spenser's *Faery Queen*.

Lowell entered Harvard in 1834. He scribbled for the college magazine *Harvardiana*, wrote ebullient letters to "My dearest Shack," and plunged into omnivorous reading. In his senior year he cut recitations and chapel in the face of repeated warnings, committed an indiscretion at evening prayers, and was sent to rusticate at Concord. Here he met Emerson and Thoreau. "I met Thoreau last night, and it is exquisitely amusing to see how he imitates Emerson's tone and manner. With my eyes shut, I shouldn't know them apart."[1] As for Emerson: "He is a good-natured man in spite of his doctrines." Lowell never got into sympathy with Thoreau, while for Emerson he was later to conceive an ardent friendship and an abiding admiration.

[1] *Letters*, i., 27.

Lowell's heritage of conservatism found expression in his class poem. "The objects of his satire," says Greenslet, "were Emerson and Transcendentalism, Carlyle, Abolitionists, Temperance Agitators, Woman's Righters, and Vegetarians." Here too by the irony of fate his views were to encounter a decided change. Transcendentalism was to crop out in his later writings; he was to make some of Carlyle's views his own and to confess towards him a secret partiality. The whirligig of time brought other revenges: he was to join forces with the Abolitionists and to lecture on Woman's Rights and Temperance.

After getting his degree in 1838, Lowell was forced to decide on a profession. Literature appealed to him but it was a precarious calling, with little or no standing at the time. The ministry would have given open play to the didactic strain that was strong in him, but scruples held him back. He enters Dane Law School where he reads Blackstone "with as good a grace and as few wry faces as I may."[1] Within a month he has "renounced the law" and decided "to settle down into a business man at last."[1] About three weeks afterwards he chances to hear Webster, the great Webster, argue a case before the United States Court, and within an hour has "determined to continue in my profession and study as well as I could."[2] But these were not happy days. Law

[1] *Letters*, i., 32. [2] *Ibid.*, i., 33.

was uncongenial. Lowell had been disappointed in love and even meditated suicide. In February, 1839, he wrote: "I have quitted the law forever." Ten days later: "I am certainly just at present in a miserable state." But he thinks that "next Monday may see me with Kent's Commentaries under my arm." Meanwhile he "sometimes actually needs to write somewhat in verse." It is not hard to see where all this will finally end. In May, 1839, Lowell resumed his studies in law, received his degree in the summer of 1840, and a few months later became engaged to Miss Maria White, "a very pleasant and pleasing young lady," who knows "more about poetry than anyone I am acquainted with."[1]

From the stimulus that came to him from his engagement to a woman of beauty, high ideals, and poetic sensibility, Lowell profited greatly. Something about the witchery that was Maria White's accentuated those phases of Lowell's temperament which were his heritage from a mother who was a romantic by nature. He wrote verse and, introduced by Miss White to a group of her friends known as "The Band," found himself in an atmosphere electric with abolitionism and transcendentalism. Transcendentalism, so far as it followed Emerson, manifested itself in a vague mysticism, a pantheistic conception of God, optimism, and a general idealism. These various

[1] *Letters*, i., 51.

phases appear now and then through a large part of Lowell's work, but mostly before 1848. In a paper on "Song Writing," to take but one example, he showed unmistakable traces of Emerson:

> True poetry is but the perfect reflex of true knowledge, and true knowledge is spiritual knowledge, which comes only of love, and which when it has solved the mystery of one, even the smallest effluence of the eternal beauty, which surrounds us like an atmosphere, becomes a clue leading to the heart of the seeming labyrinth. . . . Many things unseal the springs of tenderness in us ere the full glory of our nature gushes forth to the one benign Spirit which interprets for us all mystery and is the key to unlock all the most secret shrines of beauty.[1]

If the following experience, detailed in a letter of September, 1842, could have occurred to a man of a temperament impressionable almost to the degree of mysticism, it is also true that the peculiar nature of the experience could only have been met with in an atmosphere surcharged with transcendentalism:

> I have got a clue to a whole system of spiritual philosophy. I had a revelation last Friday evening. I was at Mary's, and happening to say something of the presence of spirits (of whom, I said, I was often dimly aware), Mr. Putnam entered into an argument with me on spiritual matters. As I was speaking, the

[1] *The Pioneer*, Feb., 1843; reprinted in *Early Writings*, p. 77.

whole system rose up before me like a vague Destiny looming from the abyss. I never before so clearly felt the spirit of God in me and around me. The whole room seemed to me full of God. The air seemed to waver to and fro with the presence of Something I knew not what. I spoke with the calmness and clearness of a prophet. I cannot yet tell you what this revelation was. I have not yet studied it enough, but I shall perfect it one day and then you shall hear it and acknowledge its grandeur. It embraces all other systems.[1]

One cannot but note the buoyant enthusiasm and self-confidence of the last two sentences. Lowell never became deeply entangled in the excesses of the movement which he pictured so humorously in *Thoreau* from the vantage point of later years.

Abolitionism was by no means the fashion in the early '40's, but this was nothing to an enthusiast, and before the year was out Lowell was heart and soul in the movement. Writing to his classmate Heath, a Virginian, he says: "I cannot reason on the subject. A man who is in the right can never reason. He can only affirm." Further: "My heart whirls and tosses like a maelstrom when I think of it [slavery]." His letters during these years are filled with such phrases as "the freedom of 5,000,000 of men," the "curse of slavery," and the like.

[1] *Letters*, i., 69 ff.

The stimulus of love and friendships, the need of success, and the new enthusiasm born of his interest in abolitionism, while they brought no clients to Lowell the lawyer, furnished forceful impulse to Lowell the poet. In the fall of 1840 appeared *A Year's Life*, a volume of poems, a few of which were of high quality. All told they were rather vague, but marked a poet to whom love and human brotherhood were topics of vital interest.

To the *Boston Miscellany*, edited by his friend Hale, Lowell contributed a sheaf of prose essays during 1842. The most ambitious of them were papers on Elizabethan dramatists, Chapman, Webster, Ford, and Massinger. They are important as Lowell's first ventures in criticism. Not that they are seriously to be regarded as critical, for their aim was to set out beautiful passages from the old plays with comments—signposts for admiration—rather than to investigate dramatical construction or character development. In tone we find an odd blend of sophomoricism which believes itself knowledge of the world; an air of superiority none the less present because entirely unconscious; a tendency to preach which may have been a heritage but was to remain an abiding possession. "We have grown too polite for what is holiest, noblest, and kindest in the social relations of life; but alas! to lie, to blush, to conceal, to envy, to sneer, to be illiberal,—

these trench not on the bounds of any modesty, human or divine."[1] One thing about these papers is unmistakable: Lowell had thus early an excellent taste which led him to recognize real poetry when he saw it. Not a single selection from the dramatists—and he gives many—fails to justify itself for beauty of phrasing or imaginative quality.

A fifth paper of the series on the Elizabethans appeared in *The Pioneer* for January, 1843, a magazine which Lowell himself launched with high hopes of success. It was hardly started when a serious trouble with his eyes sent him to New York for medical treatment. Three numbers of the new magazine appeared; the project was then abandoned. It may be seriously questioned how wide a patronage an editor was to command who assumed in his prospectus the position of *arbiter elegantiæ*:

> The object of the subscribers in establishing *The Pioneer* is to furnish the intelligent and reflecting portion of the reading public with a rational substitute for the enormous quantity of thrice diluted trash in the shape of namby-pamby love tales and sketches which is monthly poured out to them by many of our popular magazines, and to offer instead thereof a healthy and manly Periodical Literature, whose perusal will not necessarily involve a loss of time and a deterioration of every moral and intellectual faculty.

[1] *Early Writings*, p. 124.

Returning from New York where he had become acquainted with Willis and other *literati* of the metropolis, Lowell established himself at his father's home at Elmwood and prepared for the press a volume of poems which was issued late in the year 1843. He worked under depressing conditions, for his mother's mind had given way and that of his sister Rebecca betrayed signs of disorder. The White home was easily accessible and Lowell found solace in the company of his future wife. His volume received a gratifying reception and marked indeed, in sureness of tone and interest in the questions of the hour, a distinct advance over *A Year's Life*. In the success which attended the publication of these poems was mingled an ounce of bitter. Margaret Fuller, in her *Review of American Literature*, said of Lowell: "His interest in the moral questions of the day has supplied the want of vitality in himself." Lowell repaid the score in *A Fable for Critics;* he was hurt. Could it be that he felt some essential truth in the charge?

On the literary work in which he was now engaged, Lowell could spend his undivided energies. For although he wrote in March, 1841, "I am getting quite in love with the law," he confessed fourteen months later that it was a calling "which I hate, and for which I am not *well* fitted, to say the least." Six months later he abandoned it forever. "I cannot write well here in this cramped

up lawyer's office feeling all the time that I am giving the lie to my destiny." To that destiny as a man of letters he yielded himself, and with a sense of freedom, the first in years, he plunged into writing with a will.

Late in the following year Lowell was married to Maria White, whose influence remained a dominant factor during her life. That same month appeared his first volume of prose, *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets*. The first half of the volume is given over to Chaucer; the second half to the old dramatists, Chapman and Ford. These papers are more ambitious than those published in the *Boston Miscellany*. There is about them a greater sureness, one might almost say cocksureness, which suggests a kinship between Lowell and Macaulay. They are lengthy, with frequent and by no means brief digressions, with farfetched introductions and spots of fervid rhetoric which dangerously approach the purple patch. Speaking of the prophet who bears a message to the world, he says: "In most cases men do not recognize him, till the disguise of flesh has fallen off, and the white wings of the angel are seen glancing in the full sunshine of that peace, back into whose welcoming bosom their flight is turned."[1] Here is all the vagueness of transcendentalism without anything of that prophetic tone which marked the utterances of its protagonist. The

[1] *Conversations*, p. 222.

old poets get no lion's share of attention; Lowell empties his mind of his ideas on poetry, on love, on abolitionism, and politics; on every topic he undisguisedly assumes a didactic attitude. That bent of his mind which one might call puritanism appears when he says of Pope's poetry: "Show me a line that makes you love God and your neighbour better, that inclines you to meekness, charity, and forbearance, and I will show you a hundred that make it easier for you to be the odious reverse of all these."[1]

Essentially the *Conversations*, so far as they concerned the Elizabethan dramatists, were the earlier papers in the *Boston Miscellany*, with the addition of numerous digressions on such topics as appealed to Lowell for an expression of opinion. Passages are transferred verbatim; often whole pages appear in *Conversations* with scarcely any change. On the whole the changes are away from simplicity towards a more expansive diction. In the *Miscellany*, for example, we find, "Nature is never afraid to reason in a circle." This becomes in *Conversations:* "Nature is never afraid to reason in a circle; we must let her assume her premises and make our deductions logical accordingly."

In *Conversations* Lowell attempts to do more than state appreciative dicta; he seems desirous of getting at ultimate principles. "Shakespeare's characters," he says in *Early Writings*, "modify his

[1] *Conversations*, p. 149.

plots as much as his plots modify his characters." After expanding this sentence slightly in *Conversations*, he adds: "This may be the result of his unapproachable art; for art in him is but the tracing of nature to her primordial laws; is but nature precipitated as it were by the infallible test of philosophy." The figurative mode of expression is worthy of notice. Wordsworth's *Excursion* is referred to and a discussion follows regarding the peddler-poet and the poetic element in man in general. This discussion betrays gaps in Lowell's mental processes and is phrased in figurative language; the sureness of statement is at variance with the uncertainty in thought. Opening to a page at random we come upon mention of Isaac Walton, Herbert, Cowper, Mrs. Unwin, Goldsmith, Collins, Mme. De Staël, Dwight, Milton. A motley array for a single page! Lowell, twenty-five years of age, has been a hard reader, and has made himself acquainted with the great names of literature. Shakespeare we come upon constantly; already he was *deus certe* to Lowell. As in the early papers in the *Boston Miscellany* and the *Pioneer*, Lowell selects excerpts from his poets with a fine and discriminating taste.[1]

After his marriage in December, 1843, Lowell went to Philadelphia with his young bride, as an editorial writer for the *Pennsylvania Freeman*.

[1] Most of the excerpts from the dramatic poets were identical with those given in the earlier papers.

Both the Lowells contributed frequent verse to the *Broadway Journal*, then edited by their friend Briggs. The *Freeman's* anti-slavery policy was not assertive enough to suit the views of Lowell, who besides found it "hard to write when one is first married." His connection with the *Freeman*, one is not surprised to find, came to an end in May, and he returned with his wife to Elmwood.

In spite of the happiness of married life and the demands of literature, Lowell was not able entirely to dominate his adverse moods.

> My sorrows [he writes] are not literary ones, but those of daily life. I pass through the world and meet with scarcely a response to the affectionateness of my nature. I believe Maria only knows how loving I am truly. Brought up in a very reserved and conventional family, I cannot in society appear what I really am. I go out sometimes with my heart so full of yearning towards my fellows that the indifferent look with which even entire strangers pass me brings tears into my eyes. And then to be looked upon by those who *do* know me (externally) as "Lowell the Poet"—it makes me sick. Why not Lowell the man, —the boy rather,—as Jemmy Lowell, as I was at school?[1]

It was fortunate that he soon found in the birth of a child, Blanche, born December 31, 1845, and in the increasing demands of literature, im-

[1] *Letters*, i., 101.

pulses away from such morbid yielding to mood. His ardor runs high and his keen interest in reform in general leads him to reproach Holmes, ten years his senior, whom he scarcely knew, with indifference. Meantime he receives a transatlantic hearing for abolitionism by contributing four papers early in 1846 to the London *Daily News*. But he was to be known in England and indeed in America more by his next venture than by anything he had yet achieved.

In the Boston *Courier* for June 17, 1846, appeared the first of the *Biglow Papers*. Three more numbers followed during the next year, a year when the indolence of which Lowell all his life complained, was in his blood. But he awoke in 1848, issued a second volume of poems, a rapid series of articles for the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, seven more numbers while indignation over the Mexican War knocked at his heart, and most important of all from our present point of view, *A Fable for Critics*.

Although the *Fable for Critics* is frankly a *jeu d'esprit*, bristling with whimsicalities of tone and manner, it contains many keen characterizations of American writers of the time. It was a distinct advance over Margaret Fuller's *Review of American Literature*, which contained some good things, but was more notable for erratic than for good judgment. Lowell, who put no uncertain finger on the sound and the weak spots of the author

discussed, did not show himself infallible. He failed to do adequate justice to Poe, Bryant, and Thoreau. But the deeper qualities of Holmes, Cooper, Hawthorne, Whittier, and Emerson, Lowell undoubtedly did suggest. He constantly translates his characterizations into figurative language, a tendency which he never abandoned. Speaking of Hawthorne and his "genius so shrinking and rare," he goes on:

A frame so robust with a nature so sweet,
So earnest, so graceful, so lithe, and so fleet,
Is worth a descent from Olympus to meet;
'Tis as if a rough oak that for ages had stood
With his gnarled bony branches like ribs of the wood,
Should bloom after cycles of struggle and scathe,
With a single anemone trembly and rathe.

There is little or no attempt to go into principles; in the last analysis the poem is a series of lightning-flash characterizations which are sound on the whole because Lowell's intuitive perception was clear.

As a wit and humorist, Lowell assumed a high rank after the publication of the *Fable* and the *Biglow Papers*. The latter work was pirated in England in 1859, and the man who was afterwards to be Ambassador at the Court of St. James and to be regarded as the foremost of American men of letters, was first known only as a writer of jingling verses in Yankee dialect. The enthusi-

asm with which Lowell regarded reform in general and abolitionism in particular fired him with indignation over the prosecution of a war which to him represented jingoism and the lust of slavery for aggrandizement.

Reform in politics was always to be an absorbing topic with Lowell, but now that the war was ended his interest flagged for a time. In the new poem he is projecting, *The Nooning*, he disclaims any intention of giving "even a glance towards reform." He is feeling perhaps the reaction from the tense enthusiasm which his wife aroused and with her friends of "The Band" kept stimulated. But with the years he has drifted away from "The Band" and drawn near to the coterie of friends who made Boston a centre of thought and letters. And the keen impulse which his wife furnished was becoming dulled with her steady decline in health. Lowell himself was eager to take her to Europe that they both might enjoy a long holiday in the midst of "new faces, other minds." In July, 1851, he sailed with his wife and two children for the Mediterranean.

Most of the first year abroad was spent in Italy. In November, 1852, Lowell wrote to Briggs: "I have written nothing since I left home except a few letters and a journal now and then. I have been absorbing. I have studied Art to some purpose." His tendency to indolence afflicts his conscience at times. He writes: "I am beginning,

I hope, to find out that I can work. Laziness has ruined me hitherto." From Italy the Lowells passed through Switzerland, Germany, and France and spent some time in England. Lowell is in a depressed mood which is evident in all his letters. His little son has died and is buried at Rome; his wife is steadily declining in health. Back in America among the beloved surroundings of Cambridge, Maria Lowell dies (October 27, 1853) and Lowell has to summon up all the reserves of a nature "sloping to the southern side" in order to battle against the feeling of desolation which threatened to overwhelm him.

If that reserve and self-control at crises which came to Lowell from the paternal side stood him in good stead at this time, the maternal heritage of sensitiveness to impressions made his faculty of vision especially acute. He saw his wife in dreams, now alone, now with her child on her knee, and again he sees "a crescent of angels standing and shining silently."[1]

But the world of matter-of-fact surrounds him and he finally gets his grip on things again. Some time before he was asked to deliver a course of lectures at Lowell Institute and was paid in advance. The labor of preparing the series of twelve, which he purposed giving, furnished him with an outlet for his mental activities. The course began January 7, 1855. Two days later he writes

[1] Scudder, i., 358.

to W. J. Stillman: "I delivered my first lecture to a crowded hall on Tuesday night and I believe I have succeeded. The lecture was somewhat abstract, but I kept the audience perfectly still for an hour and a quarter." This first lecture

was occupied with definitions, and in a familiar way Lowell set about distinguishing poetry from prose. . . . Having cleared the way, he took up the consideration of English poetry in the historical order, dealing with the forerunners, Piers Ploughman's Vision, the Metrical Romances, and the Ballads; and then devoting one lecture each to Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Butler, and Pope.[1]

In the next discourse he took up the subject of poetic diction; in the eleventh, he dealt with Wordsworth; in the twelfth, with "The Function of the Poet." The series proved a decided success.[2] This is not hard to understand. They were popular in form, free from abstruse discussion, rich in illustration, in citation from the authors under discussion, and sparkling in humor. In breadth of treatment, grace of diction, and freedom from didacticism they mark a distinct advance over the *Conversations*. Incomplete as they are it is difficult to estimate them justly.

[1] Scudder, i., 374.

[2] These lectures were printed in more or less abridged form in the *Boston Advertiser*, whence they were reprinted in 1897, y the Rowfant Club of Cleveland, Ohio.

But whatever was good in them reappeared in the later critical essays. Lowell was not the man to waste an epigrammatic sentence, a comprehensive paragraph, or a striking figure.[1] The following sentence is typical; it shows Lowell's irony, his humor, his poetry, and that tendency already noted which was ever a prime characteristic of his criticism,—interpretation by means of figures:

In our New England especially, where May-day is a mere superstition and the Maypole a poor half-hardy exotic which shivers in an east wind almost as sharp as Endicott's axe,—where frozen children, in unseasonable muslin, celebrate the floral games with nosegays from the milliner's, and winter reels back, like shattered Lear, bringing the dead spring in his arms, her budding breast and wan dislustered cheeks all overblown with the drifts and frosty streaks of his white beard,—where even Chanticleer, whose sap mounts earliest in that dawn of the year, stands dumb beneath the dripping eaves of his harem, with his melancholy tail at half-mast,—one has only to take down a volume of Chaucer, and forthwith he can scarce step without crushing a daisy, and the

[1] On this point compare the quotation in the text with the following from "Under the Willows" (1868), *Poetical Works*, iii., 151.

"And Winter suddenly, like crazy Lear,
Reels back, and brings the dead May in his arms,
Her budding breasts and wan dislustered front
With frosty streaks and drifts of his white beard
All overblown."

sunshine flickers on small new leaves that throb thick with song of merle and mavis.[1]

It is not hard to understand why this course appealed to a popular audience.

A speedy and important result followed these lectures: Lowell received the appointment to succeed Longfellow as Professor of Belles-Lettres at Harvard. He accepted and went abroad for a year spending most of the time in Germany studying the language diligently and attending lectures in German literature and æsthetics.[2] "I have made some headway," he writes in January, 1856, "can read German almost as easily as French. That is already something. Meanwhile, my studies do me good. My brain is clear and my outlook over life seems to broaden." Again: "My study of German widens so before me—the history of the literature is so interesting and, by its harmonies and discords with our own, sets so many things in a white light for me, that I see

[1] *Lectures on English Poets* (Rowfant Club), p. 80.

[2] He writes from Dresden in October, 1855: "I am reading for my own amusement (du liebe Gott!) the *aesthetische Forschungen* von Adolf Zeising, pp. 568, large octavo! Then I overset something aus German into English. . . . *Nachmittag* I study Spanish with a nice young Spaniard who is in the house, to whom I teach English in return. *Um sechs Uhr ich spazieren gehe*, and at 7 come home and Dr. R. dictates and I write. . . . Then, after tea, we sit and talk German—or what some of us take to be such—and which I speak like a native—of some other country." *Letters*, i., 241 ff.

infinite work and satisfaction ahead. I have learned a little of the German thoroughness of investigation." He is eager to go to Italy: "Any trifle is enough to whirl my thoughts in that direction." And he soothes his scruples over this vagrant desire by exclaiming: "It would freshen up my Italian, which has fallen frightfully into abeyance here." He runs away to Italy for a few months and returns to Dresden in June. He has not outgrown his moods. His holiday across the Alps recalls the gloomy winter in Germany, and he wonders how he succeeded in learning so much of the language "when I think what a restive creature I was all last winter."

In the autumn (1856), he undertook his duties as professor and remained in harness for sixteen consecutive years. The continuity of his life, rudely broken by the death of his first wife, was renewed by his marriage in 1857, to Miss Frances Dunlop, the governess of his daughter. He could now without domestic anxiety concentrate on his professorial work. This he carried on in no strict fashion. His method of conducting class varied with his mood. He entertained the students at his home but was not certain to recall their faces when next he met them. Although freed from most of the drudgery of teaching languages, Lowell never quite reconciled himself to the class-room. "What can a man do in a treadmill?" he asks, writing to Fields in 1864. Again: "If I

can sell some of my land and slip my neck out of this collar that galls me so I should be a man again. I am not the stuff that professors are made of. . . . My professorship is wearing me out." His moods pursued him always. He gives warning to Howells in 1882, regarding the acceptance of a professorship: "If you are a systematic worker, independent of moods, and sure of your genius whenever you want it, there might be no risk in accepting."

Lowell worked hard, not infrequently poring over his books till early morning. Among his courses at various times during his professorship were those in German, Spanish (especially *Don Quixote*), Italian (concentrating on Dante), and Old French, the last becoming his special field.

In the meantime his labors were not confined to the classroom and its concerns. He accepted the editorship of the newly established *Atlantic Monthly*, and with such contributors as Emerson, Holmes, Longfellow, Whittier, and Thoreau, an excellent literary taste of his own, and a capacity for hard work which outer influence had forced to become fairly consistent, he achieved a distinct success in the undertaking. Most of the best-known contributors to the *Atlantic* formed the Saturday Club whose monthly dinners became famous. Here Lowell met in intimacy minds at once cultured and acute and the contact gave him much of that stimulus which he craved.

To the *Atlantic* Lowell contributed freely—reviews, poems, and political papers. Politics engaged his attention again with the outbreak of the Civil War, and he even revived the *Biglow Papers* to furnish a vent for his ardent opinions. Five young relatives died in the Federal service; Lowell's white-hot patriotism was not an abstract matter, merely a phase of his philosophy of life; it was vibrant with that emotion which love must feel when its dear ones taste the bitterness of death. That is why several of the second series of the *Biglow Papers* glow with a passion quite unknown to the earlier set. Lowell however did not retain his editorial position through the troublous days of the Civil War: he yielded his chair to James T. Fields in 1861, and in January, 1864, undertook the editorship of the *North American Review* jointly with Charles Eliot Norton.

In the *North American* most of Lowell's subsequent papers on politics and criticism were to appear. His political essays evidence his unfailing brilliance, but they are often charged with literary allusions which make one doubt their appeal to any but the highly educated few: "In this late advertising tour of a policy in want of a party, Cleon and Agoracritus seem to have joined partnership and the manners of the man match those of the master."[1] These essays are clearly the work of one who writes from the sanctum in

[1] *Works*, v., 296.

an appeal to what must prove a limited circle. At times they show breadth of view and such wisdom as could say, as early as 1866: [The Southern people] "have won our respect, the people of Virginia especially, by their devotion . . . in sustaining what they believed to be their righteous quarrel."[1] But one finds at other times a confusion of expression as well as of thought, a tendency to let argument gyrate instead of advance, an indulgence in sophomoric humor and even personalities: "We remember seeing the prodigious nose of Mr. Tyler (for the person behind it had been added by nature merely as the handle to so fine a hatchet) drawn by six white horses through the streets."[2] There is no mistaking Lowell in these papers; he is the enthusiast of 1840 grown older, confident in his point of view, impatient towards a difference of opinion, inclined to cocksureness in tone.

Lowell's best work in the *North American* was not concerned with politics but with literature. From 1865 till 1876 he published there all those critical essays which were later to be issued as *My Study Windows* and as the two volumes of *Among My Books*. Written as they were at the height of his powers, they furnished the basis on which his reputation as a critic largely rests.[3]

[1] *Works*, v., 325. Cf., also, v., 152, 227.

[2] *Ibid.*, v., 296. Cf., also, v., 214, 250, 253.

[3] Numerous book reviews in various magazines, especially in the *Atlantic* and *North American*, have not been reprinted.

The years from 1865 to 1872 saw the heyday of Lowell's achievement, nearly all his best prose writings, many of his finest poems, and his most sustained efforts in sanctum and classroom. Feeling the need of a rest after sixteen years of teaching, he resigned his places both as editor and professor in 1872, and spent the following two years in Europe. The reaction from the labor of teaching and editing brought about a fall in spirits. "The prevailing tone of his letters during these years was, as always, cheerful; but reading between the lines we can see that his mood partook more and more of a sombre melancholy."[1] Some months were spent in England, a winter in Paris, where Lowell worked hard at Old French, the summer following in Switzerland and Germany, and the winter in Italy. From Naples he writes that he has been "twice to the incomparable museum which is to me the most interesting in the world." But on the whole his Italian letters make almost no mention of the art treasures which surround him. Remembering this same lack in his letters during his earlier journeyings, one is not surprised. He received academic honors from Oxford and Cambridge and returned home to America in July, 1874, resolved, as he wrote humorously to Hughes, to try "to be as good as

[1] Greenslet, p. 174. Lowell writes to Norton, February, 1874: [I am] "happy for the first time (I mean consciously happy) since I came over here."

the orator [at Cambridge University] said I was."

He resumed his teaching at Harvard, being persuaded to accept the chair which he had resigned on going abroad, read incredibly long hours every day, and in his poetry showed a revival of his old-time interest in political reform. Sent to the Republican National Convention of 1876, he opposed Blaine, and as a Presidential Elector he voted for Hayes against Tilden in the contested election of that year.

Eminent men of letters like Irving and Motley had been sent on diplomatic missions in the past, and talk of Lowell for a similar appointment began to appear in the press. He declined the post at Vienna, but later accepted that at Madrid. He dislikes leaving Elmwood, he writes his daughter, especially "while it is looking so lovely." But the appointment to Madrid "will be of some use to me in my studies."

Lowell's career as Minister to Spain was successful, but as he wrote almost nothing except what his office demanded, the years 1877 to 1880 have little bearing on him as a man of letters. He becomes proficient in Spanish, picks up rare editions of *Don Quixote* and the *Cronica* of the Cid, and complains of the lack of scientific booksellers. He was obviously Lowell the man of letters despite the requirements of diplomacy, and it is interesting to note that in his dispatches to the State Department at Washington he could record that the

prettiest women at a great public function were those from Andalusia, and that in writing of the death of the young Queen Mercedes, he should quote a "familiar stanza of Malherbe."

In the late spring he went on an excursion to Greece. Writing to his daughter from Athens, he says he found the town "shabby" and "modern" and "was for turning about and going straight back again." He visits the Acropolis and the Parthenon, which do not seem to make any notable impression. His holiday over, he returns to Madrid to resume his work.

One day in January, 1880, he receives notice of his transference to the Court of St. James. Probably no part of Lowell's career gave him more satisfaction than the five years he spent as American Minister to England. A notable man of letters, a brilliant conversationalist, a ready speaker, the accredited representative of a great nation, he had every reason to receive kindly treatment in England. There can be no doubt but that in an important sense Lowell's career was a distinct success. It has been pointed out that his social affiliations centred in the two classes, literary and aristocratic, whose opposition had been directed against the North in the Civil War.[1] One remembers Lowell's bitter attacks upon England's pro-Southern attitude during those tense years, and recalls too that the irony of fate

[1] *Vide Literary World*, vol. xvi., 222 ff.

had played other and earlier pranks with him. He seems to have been quite out of touch with men like Bright and Dilke and Chamberlain. Was it true that his indolence of temperament led him to "seek the line of least resistance," and that "this was for him in England the line of aristocratic association?"[1]

There was talk of making him Lord Rector of St. Andrews, and before returning to America he refused a nomination to a professorship at Oxford. But most important for our purpose are his literary utterances, especially those on Fielding, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which he delivered on various occasions during his English mission. These *critiques* are not Lowell's best work. They are rather fragmentary, more like notes hastily assembled than like finished products. He himself was conscious of their defects and regretted that his official duties kept him at the beck of every chance interruption. For one thing especially we may notice them here: the tone is more nearly that of a man writing "at the centre" than that of any other of his works. He was in London, not in Cambridge, Massachussetts, and he recognized that indefinable something which marks the atmosphere of a cosmopolis. It was a good thing for Lowell to be at the centre and to feel the critical eyes of a select audience in Westminster Abbey leveled

[1] *Vide Literary World*, vol. xvi., 223.

upon him. It was unfortunate that cosmopolitan influence came so late.

Superseded by Mr. Phelps in his diplomatic mission, Lowell returned to America in June, 1885. He had six years still to live, during which the love of friends and wide recognition as the leading figure in American letters were unquestioningly his. He contributed poems now and then to various publications, especially to the *Atlantic*, gave occasional addresses, and wrote a few critical essays. This comprised, with one exception, his original work. He looked after the collection and publication of various of his writings, in prose and verse, which had already reached the public either as addresses or in the pages of magazines and reviews.

It was a remarkable coincidence that Lowell's last sustained effort in the field of criticism should, like his earliest one, have to do with the Elizabethan dramatists; that his last conspicuous appearance as a lecturer should be, like his first one, under the auspices of the Lowell Institute. It is interesting to compare the thin volume called *Old English Dramatists*, published after Lowell's death, with the earlier papers on the same subject in the *Boston Miscellany* in 1842, and in *Conversations* published two years later. These lectures of 1887, like the early papers, comprise excerpts from the dramatists, with appreciative comment, rather than a body of formal criticism. Like the *Conversations* they furnish Lowell a medium for

the expression of his views on various matters: the need of a National Capital; the value of biography in the appreciation of an author; the place of imagination in life. But Lowell does not wander far afield. He comes back to a discussion of form, of plot, of the refinement of language, questions which were beyond his power adequately to treat in *Conversations*. His tone has the easy certainty born of ripe years given to a study of the subject; it is the tone of a man who looks at his audience from the eminence which belongs to a long life and knowledge of the world and an established reputation in the field of letters. There is no striking shift of opinion between the early and the final discussion of the old dramatists, except in one instance. To the Lowell of the *Boston Miscellany* and *Conversations*, Ford is a prime favorite. Said the Lowell of 1844:

> Set beside almost any of our modern dramatists, there is certainly something grand and free about him [Ford]; and though he has not that "large utterance" which belonged to Shakespeare, and perhaps one or two others of his contemporaries, he sometimes rises into a fiery earnestness which falls little short of sublimity.[1]

Says the Lowell of 1887:

> In reading him [Ford] again after a long interval, with elements of wider comparison, and provided

[1] *Conversations*, p. 238.

with more trustworthy tests, I find that the greater part of what I once took on trust as precious is really paste and pinchbeck. . . . He abounds especially in mock pathos. . . . Having once come to know the jealous secretiveness of real sorrow, we resent these conspiracies to waylay our sympathy.[1]

One can explain and to some extent appreciate Lowell's resentment over what he deems mock pathos, if one remembers that this is the Lowell who but two short years before had seen his wife laid to rest in an English grave.

It was to miscellaneous literary work that Lowell devoted these last years. But he did not forget the friends across the Atlantic. He sailed to England to spend there the summer of 1886 and made the voyage again in the spring of 1887. He soon found himself, he writes, "trotting around in the old vicious circle of dinners and receptions." London stimulated him. "It amuses and interests me. My own vitality seems to reinforce itself as if by some unconscious transfusion of blood from these ever throbbing arteries of life into my own." But he was steadily getting to the point where such stimulus was becoming ineffectual, for his physical vitality was on the wane. He spent the two following summers in England,[2] and on returning devoted himself to revising the

[1] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 128 ff.

[2] In June, 1888, Lowell received the degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Bologna.

final edition of his works. Unable to get about except with great pain, he reads Scott and Boswell's *Johnson* and "Kipling's stories . . . with real pleasure." He was a reader to the end.

James Russell Lowell died at Elmwood in Cambridge, August 12, 1891.

What now is one to keep in mind about Lowell? His father was a man of charming manner, ardent piety, but of little originality. His mother was accredited with second sight. She had a romantic nature and was a great reader. In Lowell himself were blended the strong common-sense and conservatism of New England forebears and the tendency to romance and mysticism which was his maternal heritage. As early as 1840 he has visions; after his first wife's death he sees her in dreams; as late as 1889 he tells Dr. Mitchell that "commonly he saw a figure in medieval costume which kept on one side of him."[1] The world that eludes mortal eyes seems always ready to become palpable to his vision. This mystic strain in him does not always conjure up pleasant or even neutral imaginings. "I remember," he writes in 1884, "I remember the ugly fancy I had sometimes that I was another person, and used to hesitate at the door [of my study] when I came back from my late night walks, lest I should find the real owner of the room sitting in my chair before the fire."

[1] *Letters*, ii., 371 (note).

It is obvious that such a man will be to a considerable extent the creature of moods. He says of himself:

> For me Fate gave, whate'er she else denied,
> A nature sloping to the southern side;
> I thank her for it, though when clouds arise
> Such natures double-darken gloomy skies.

The pleasant moods were ebullient. "I am sure that for my single self, I always am a fool when I am happy."[1] His letters at such a time sparkle with quips and cranks and puns; one cannot but wonder how such a buoyant creature could ever know depression. But the depression comes. He writes in 1884: "Every now and then my good spirits carry me away and people find me amusing, but reaction always sets in the moment I am left to myself." We shall return to this last sentence again.

Lowell frequently accuses himself of dilatoriness and indolence, "constitutional indolence," he calls it. In moments of depression he thinks of this weakness as almost fatal: "I have thrown away hours enough to have made a handsome reputation out of."[2] In 1878 he speaks of willing his books to the Harvard Library, "whither they will go when I am in Mount Auburn, with so much undone that I might have done. I hope my grand-

[1] *Letters*, i., 45. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 179.

sons will have some of the method I have always lacked." He finds it depressing (in 1889) "to be reminded that one has lived so long and done so little."[1] These are the regrets of a man suffering not merely from a mood of depression, but from the consciousness of a fatal defect within himself which robbed his accomplishment of its best vitality. What this defect was will be evident later on.

At least once Lowell's mood carried him, as we have seen, close to sentimentality.[2] But while the temperament of his fathers and his own sense of humor kept him from such an extreme thereafter, his vein of sentiment lay ever near the surface. At eighteen he likes "the poetry that sends a cold thrill through one . . . and brings tears into one's eyes." He says he could never read the biblical passage, "Bless me, even me also, O my Father!" without tears in his eyes. Love, the greatest of sentiments, affected him deeply. We are not surprised at his youthful susceptibility, and are prepared to find that "in common with Petrarch, Dante, Tasso, and Byron, I was desperately in love before I was ten years old."[3] At eighteen he writes: "Shack, pity me! I am in love—and have been so for some time, hopelessly

[1] *Letters*, ii., 367.

[2] *Vide Letters*, i., 101. Cf. "I do abhor sentimentality from the bottom of my soul."—*Ibid.*, i., 205.

[3] *Ibid.*, i., 18.

in love." One day at Allston's gallery, "I saw something that drove me almost crazy with delight. You know how beauty always affects me. Well, yesterday I saw the most beautiful creature I ever set these eyes upon! 'Twere vain to attempt to describe her," etc.[1] One must note how ebulliently enthusiastic he is when pleased. Shakespeare awoke in him a not utterly dissimilar enthusiasm. To the attraction of feminine influence Lowell was always open. Engaged to Maria White, he responded for years to the powerful stimulus which her temperament and nature exerted upon his. At a later period, Frances Dunlop, a woman of fine distinction of mind, came into his life to fill that void which the death of his first wife had left. Many of his most delightful letters were written to women. One notices that during his last years his correspondence is more and more devoted to his feminine friends, the delicate responsiveness of whose sympathy he doubtless felt answered to his needs. "I always thirst after affection, and depend more on the expression of it than is altogether wise."[2]

This dependence, it is fair to suggest, seems not to be a necessity to Lowell in this direction alone. One remembers his letter quoted above: "People find me amusing but the reaction always sets in the moment I am left to myself." These confessions suggest an important question: Was Lowell

[1] *Letters*, i., 40. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 76.

sufficient unto himself? Did he stand in need of impulses from without in order not merely to maintain an equable mood but to awaken that activity within him which found expression in his more important literary work? Whichever way we answer this question it is certain that influences quite outside himself played a notably large part in Lowell's life. His first poem of any worth is evoked by his position as class poet. He abandons the law only to resume it because he is impelled to emulation by the oratory of Webster. He falls under the spell of Maria White and her ideas become his. Her pet interest, abolitionism, becomes his pet interest, until with her declining health he is thrown more into contact with his circle of acquaintances in Cambridge. His ardor cools and he decides in 1850 not to "glance towards reform" in his new poem, *The Nooning*. The Mexican War evokes his first popular poetic work, the *Biglow Papers*, just as the Civil War, by demanding the lives of some dear ones among his kin, furnishes the impulse for the second series of the same work. His first effective criticism he prepares to fulfill his obligations to the Lowell Institute, and he studies hard in the field of linguistics in his capacity of professor at Harvard. The *Atlantic Monthly* stimulates him to hard work and to some production, and it is while editor of the *North American* that he writes the most of his critical essays and political papers. The demands

of occasion produce nearly all the remaining prose writings which are now among his published works. In poetry, those three odes which may be considered his *opera magna* are the fruit of occasion. Is it too much to conclude that Lowell showed a marked dependence on stimuli outside of himself and that such dependence points to a source of weakness?[1]

It has already been pointed out that Lowell was an enthusiast. Men and things that he likes, he likes superlatively. When he changes his opinions, he becomes as enthusiastic on the new side as on the old. He sneers at Emerson and then worships him; laughs at abolitionism, then makes it a fetish for years; attacks the Confederate States bitterly for treachery,[2] and then compliments them for their devotion to the cause they believed right; flings sarcasm at the English aristocracy[3] and then pays them charming compliments in his address on *Democracy*. There is no purgatory with Lowell. Perhaps there was more than a grain of truth in Poe's declaration that Lowell was a "fanatic in whatever circumstances you place him."[4]

This enthusiasm of Lowell's did not destroy

[1] Lowell "liked to have some one help him idle the time away, and keep him as long as possible from his work." Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, p. 213.

[2] *Works*, v., 80. [3] *Ibid.*, v., 214.

[4] Poe's *Works* (Stoddard's Edition), vi., 240.

that basic conservatism which was his heritage from his New England ancestry. "Lowell was at heart, as by temperament, a conservative," says his friend Curtis. "I was always a natural Tory," Lowell himself confesses. In his younger days he attended an anti-slavery convention in Boston (May, 1844), in which a vote for disunion was carried. Enthusiastic abolitionist though he was, Lowell voted against the measure. He did not want secession nor did he want war, and as late as January, 1861, his tone is that of a man who cannot convince himself that the government he has known and always taken for granted is on the eve of a mortal struggle. Devoted though he was to Emerson personally, he never became deeply impregnated with transcendentalism and pictured it with broad humor in his essay on Thoreau. He was a friend and admirer of Agassiz, but that phase of nineteenth century science which we call evolutionism awakened his distrust. He feared it might usurp the place of "that set of higher instincts which mankind have found solid under their feet in all weathers."[1] His address on *Democracy* is essentially a plea for conservatism. Accept your government as it is, he advises; make it a good government by being yourselves as individuals honest, unselfish, and patriotic.

[1] *Letters*, ii., 245. Cf. *ibid.*, ii., 168. Cf. also, *ibid.*, ii., 325: "I am a conservative (warranted to wash), and keep on the safe side—with God as against Evolution."

Interested as Lowell was in politics, he showed his interest by active participation on only one occasion. He wrote numerous political papers whose appeal could be only to the cultured elect. His political ideas were all in the large. They were the ideas of a man who loves,

> "Walled with silent books,
> To hear nor heed the world's unmeaning noise,
> Safe in my fortress stored with lifelong joys."

Lowell knew men, in fact, far less from personal contact than from commune with those same "silent books." When he starts a magazine he wants to educate the public by telling it that all the other magazines serve up "thrice-diluted trash" which tends to the "deterioration of every moral and intellectual faculty." One would hardly regard this as the attitude of a man who understood human nature. When he attempts to write a serio-comic poem called *Our Own* (1853) for *Putnam's*, he heads it with quotations from the Greek, Latin, and English, has a digression in imitation of Spenser, ambles carelessly along at his own sweet will, and then feels hurt when the poem fails. "I doubt if your magazine," he writes the editor, "will become really popular if you edit it for the mob." The implication is too evident to be missed. His letters, delightful though they are, give us no penetrating psycho-

logical glimpses of men or women he knew. Even when writing of his father, of whom his knowledge must have been the most intimate, he gets no deeper than his simplicity and magnanimity. It will be interesting to keep all this in mind when studying Lowell's critical essays.

Here is Lowell then, with his moods, grave or gay; his sensitiveness to impressions, which became at times so acute as to objectify his imaginings; a susceptibility to the beauty of women and to the responsive sympathy of their nature; a need of stimulation from outside himself; an enthusiasm which was not dampened even with changes of opinion; abiding conservatism and a knowledge of human nature which was limited—the offspring of multitudinous books rather than of contact with men.

CHAPTER II

THE RANGE OF LOWELL'S KNOWLEDGE

ALL his life Lowell was a voluminous reader. In college he "made friendships" with books "that have lasted me for life." He covered "such diverse works as Terence, Hume, Smollett, the Anthologia Græca, Hakluyt, Boileau, Scott, and Southey."[1] This bent for reading continued all his life. He wrote in 1854: "I am one of the last of the great readers," and adds that he studied "an incredible number of hours" every day. He had a large fund of intellectual curiosity, for as early as 1836 he said: "Milton has excited my ambition to read all the Greek and Latin classics which he did."

In Greek and Latin he received a good training at Mr. Wells' school and he continued these studies all through college. In fact, Latin, Greek, and mathematics were the chief studies in the curriculum at Harvard in Lowell's time. He seems to have had a good command of these languages although he protested strongly that the

[1] Scudder, i., 32

great authors of antiquity should not be "degraded from teachers of thinking to drillers in grammar, and made the ruthless pedagogues of root and inflection, instead of companions for whose society the mind must put on her highest mood. . . . What concern have we with the shades of dialect in Homer or Theocritus, provided they speak the spiritual *lingua franca* that abolishes all alienage of race, and makes whatever shore of time we land on hospitable and homelike?"[1] This last sentence throws light on Lowell's attitude towards all literatures: they are great in so far as they appeal to what is universal in men by transcending the bounds of time and place and circumstance. The classic tongues are not dead, since in them so much that is living has been written.[2] They are surcharged with life as "perhaps no other writing, except Shakespeare's, ever was or will be." How great are Plato and Aristotle! They are the masters of those who know. Greek literature is "the most fruitful comment on our own." Translation from the Greek into English, he says, is invaluable for securing a mastery of our own tongue, and he inquires what great mind since the Renaissance has failed to be saturated with Greek literature.

The Greeks, he asserts, "must furnish us with our standard of comparison," and from their literature more clearly than from any other source

[1] *Works*, iii., 33. [2] *Ibid.*, vi., 165.

are to be deduced "the laws of proportion, of design." He maintains that the persistence of poets in endeavoring to reproduce Greek tragedy is owing to a superstition regarding Greek and Latin which is a heritage from the revival of learning. The "simple and downright way of thinking" of the Greeks, "loses all its savor when we assume it to ourselves by an effort of thought."[1]

Lowell would not be understood as denying the value or the beauty of Greek tragedy. His insistence was on our making literature the immediate reflex of a civilization in which, with its manifold phases, we have a share and in which, ultimately, we put our faith. There is no art without life; no life without a simple faith in the times of which it is the expression. Greek drama was "primarily Greek and secondarily human," and though it makes a steady appeal yields an even wider dominion to Shakespearean tragedy.[2] "There is nothing in ancient art to match Shakespeare."[3]

Lowell finds Aristophanes to be "beyond question the highest type of pure comedy," and brings home his contention about the perennially human in Greek literature, by declaring that he is "by the vital and essential qualities of his humorous satire . . . more nearly our contemporary than Molière."[4] For Æschylus he has intense regard,

[1] *Works*, ii., 136.
[2] *Ibid.*, iv., 232, and iii., 65.
[3] *Ibid.*, i., 212.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 64.

declaring that he "soars over the other Greek tragedians like an eagle."[1] Nearly all the references in Lowell to Greek literature are concerned with Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. His intimacy with these appears in his essay on Shakespeare, where he points out similarities between their dramas and Shakespeare's, and cites parallel passages, quoting from the original Greek. Lowell gives frequent mention to Homer, and tells us that he prefers the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad;* but he goes into no serious discussion as to the sources of Homer's power.

Lowell evidently did not get to feel that final intimacy with Greek which makes a language part of oneself; for he speaks of divining a certain resemblance between Shakespeare and Æschylus "through the mists of a language which will not let me be sure of what I see."[2]

While Lowell praised highly the study of Latin as well as of Greek, he expresses no uncertain opinion about Latin literature in his essay on Chaucer:

> It may well be doubted whether Roman literature, always a half-hardy exotic, could ripen the seeds of living reproduction. The Roman genius was eminently practical and far more apt for the triumphs of politics and jurisprudence than of art. Supreme elegance it could and did arrive at in Virgil, but . . .

[1] *Works*, ii., 126.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 45.

it produced but one original poet . . . Horace . . . There are a half dozen pieces of Catullus unsurpassed . . . for lyric grace and fanciful tenderness . . . One profound imagination, one man, who with a more prosperous subject might have been a great poet, lifted Roman literature above its ordinary level of tasteful common-sense.[1]

This poet was Lucretius. Horace was the "poet of social life," whose best work had point, compactness, and urbane tone. He pierces through the hedge of language and, a cosmopolitan, makes a wide appeal.[2] Virgil had art and power "not only of being strong in parts, but of making those parts coherent in an harmonious whole and tributary to it." Tacitus is mentioned several times in a way that suggests how intimate was Lowell's knowledge of his work. Ovid was apparently not a favorite with the critic, who declared that if the poet "instead of sentimentalizing in the Tristia had left behind him a treatise on the language of the Getæ . . . we should have thanked him for something more truly valuable than all his poems."[3] But he is alive to Ovid's influence: "The only Latin poet who can be supposed to have influenced the spirit of medieval literature is Ovid."[4] In a letter to C. E. Norton, he expressed satisfaction on studying Lucan again, "since I bethought me for

[1] *Works*, iii., 305 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 252; iv., 282; 266.
[3] *Ibid.*, i., 121.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 301.

the first time that Lucan was the true protogenist of the *concettisti.*"[1] In much the same way, when speaking of modern sentimentalism, Lowell suggests that a tendency towards it began with Euripides and Ovid. As in the case of the Greek writers, so too with the Latins: Lowell always has them within ready reach of his retentive memory.

This fine memory of Lowell's was indeed a *sine qua non* for one who was to acquire a knowledge of languages as wide as his. His acquaintance with French, German, Italian, and Spanish, he perfected by residence in Europe which extended in all over many years. He gave courses at various times during his professorship in German, Spanish, Old French, and in Dante. He went thoroughly into the Early English Text Society's series and wrote in 1874:

I have now reached the point where I feel sure enough of myself in Old French and Old English to make my corrections with a pen instead of a pencil as I go along. Ten hours a day, on an average, I have been at it for the last two months, and get so absorbed that I turn grudgingly to anything else.

German, Lowell wrote in 1875, "is the *open sesame* to a large culture." It made many things in English literature clearer to him and was very interesting for its own sake. To only one German

[1] *Letters*, ii., 333. Allusions like those in *Letters*, i., 14, 367, 377, and 396 are eloquent of Lowell's intimacy with the classics.

writer, however, did Lowell devote a literary study: he contributed an article on Lessing to the *North American Review* for April, 1867. Goethe he alludes to frequently and in a way which shows a close knowledge and a deep admiration. Lowell calls him "the last of the *great* poets," and the "most widely receptive of critics"; but he "often fails in giving artistic coherence to his longer works."[1] Though the "figure of Goethe is grand" and "rightfully preëminent," Lowell gives us no study of him—only *obiter dicta*. The occasional reference to Schiller or Richter or Heine, with his "airy humor" and "sense of form" and "profound pathos," only surprises one the more at the comparatively slight impression which German literature seems to have made on Lowell.[2]

German scholarship he regarded with divided feelings. He acknowledged the "admirable thoroughness of the German intellect," which has "supplied the raw material in almost every branch of science for the defter wits of other nations to work on." But German criticism, "by way of being profound, too often burrows in delighted darkness quite beneath its subject, till the reader feels the ground hollow beneath him, and is fearful of caving into unknown depths of stagnant metaphysic air at every step."[3] Yet he finds German criticism

[1] *Works*, ii., 167.

[2] Cf. *Publications of the Mod. Lang. Ass'n of America*, vol. vii., p. 25 ff.

[3] *Works*, ii., 163.

preëminent in penetration though "seldom lucid and never entertaining. It may turn its light, if we have patience, into every obscurest cranny of its subject . . . but it never flashes light *out* of the subject itself, as Sainte-Beuve . . . so often does, and with such unexpected charm."[1]

In the field of French literature, *Rousseau* represents Lowell's only essay. But his work nevertheless is rich in allusions and comparisons such as would be possible only to one to whom French literature was an intimate possession. This is especially true in his essay on Dryden where in discussing French versification he points out defects in lines from Corneille's *Cinna*, which "Voltaire . . . does not notice . . . in his minute comment on this play"; in his essay on Pope and in that on Chaucer, where his knowledge of Old French literature is made to throw light upon the interesting question of Chaucer's indebtedness "for poetical suggestion or literary culture." When he comes to discuss the sounding of final and medial *e* in Chaucer, he at once appeals to Marie de France and Wace and the *Roman de la Rose*.

Of his *Dante*, his longest and most ambitious essay in criticism, Lowell said it was the result of twenty years of study. On reading the essay one cannot but be impressed with the amount of matter he has accumulated. One begins to understand why his Dante classes at college were his

[1] *Works*, ii., 166.

best. He has left no point untouched, from a consideration of German, French, and English studies of Dante, down to a suggestion that Dante may have been influenced by the doctrine of the Oriental Sufis. Lowell's admiration for the great poet is eloquent throughout the essay. As for Petrarch, poet and humanist, the critic concedes to him a wide influence on modern literature, due to the "charm of elegance," but finds his famous sonnets inferior to those of Michael Angelo. Petrarch he calls the first great sentimentalist, whose emotion demands of us to shiver before a painted flame.[1] Boccaccio receives scarcely a mention save as the biographer of Dante. But in a letter to Norton, Lowell says:

> I have read Boccaccio nearly through since commencement—I mean the *Decameron*, in order to appreciate his style. I find it very charming, and him clearly the forerunner of modern prose. A singular sweetness, ease, and grace. Nothing came near it for centuries.

Just as in Italian literature Lowell was concerned with the great figures, so too in the literature of Spain. His Spanish course at Harvard was concerned mostly with *Don Quixote*. He devoted, strange to say, none of his essays to Spanish literature, and the address on *Don Quixote* at the Working Men's College, London, is little

[1] *Works*, ii., 253 ff. *passim*.

more than a "few illustrative comments on his one immortal book." If Lowell knew his Cervantes more minutely than his Calderon, the dramatist is closer to his heart.[1] As a dramatist: "For fascination of style and profound suggestion, it would be hard to name another author superior to Calderon, if indeed equal to him."[2] He writes in one of his letters: "Calderon is surely one of the most marvelous of poets," and again as late as 1890: "There are greater poets, but none so constantly delightful." That Spanish dramatist whose fecundity has always been a marvel, is passed over in all but utter silence. The most Lowell has to say about him occurs in a letter written in 1889: "I have done some reading in Lope de Vega, but am not drawn to him or by him as to and by Calderon. Yet he is wonderful too in his way."

There can be no doubt about the advantages which a knowledge of many literatures brought to Lowell.[3] It gave him an opportunity to secure standards for judgment and bases for comparison. But the comparisons are seldom expressed except in *obiter* fashion. Shakespeare's use of language is compared with that of the Greek tragedians; Greek drama with the modern; Shakespeare with

[1] *Vide* "Nightingale in the Study," *Poetical Works*, iii., 282.

[2] *Works*, vi., 116.

[3] "I think that to know the literature of another language . . . gives us the prime benefits of foreign travel."—*Latest Literary Essays*, p. 139.

Dante as to preëminent qualities; Voltaire with Pope "as an author with whom the gift of writing was primary and that of verse secondary"; Chaucer and Dante are compared and contrasted—the most ambitious of these ventures. But these and similar instances by their very infrequency only impress one with what might be and is not. For the most part Lowell's comparisons are of writers within the same literature and that in English, as Milton with Shakespeare, Dryden with Pope, Byron with Wordsworth and Keats. He wearies quickly of sustained comparison and seems eager to have done with it. Usually the reference to a second literature is to furnish either an illustration of a single quality in the writer under discussion or a quotation bearing on the point at issue. He says for example: Dryden's "*obiter dicta* have often the penetration, and always more than the equity, of Voltaire's, for Dryden never loses temper, and never altogether qualifies his judgment by his self-love."[1] Lowell, like Goethe, regards *Samson Agonistes* as the "most successful attempt at reproducing the Greek tragedy." He adds: "Goethe admits that it alone, among modern works, has caught life from the breath of the antique spirit."[2] The *Iphigenie*, Lowell implies, is a failure. But he does not compare Milton's drama directly with Goethe's to show the reason why, although such a comparison would have

[1] *Works*, iii., 179. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 133.

tended to bring out clearly the reasons for Milton's success and Goethe's failure, and to lend more color to the critic's contention that the employment of essentially Greek subjects or the imitation of Greek forms is foredoomed to failure. With such exceptional equipment as Lowell possessed, it seems strange that he did not venture further than the mere confines of comparative criticism. It may be that he deliberately held back.

Outside of English literature, his allusions to important figures of the nineteenth century are mostly confined to the French, and these are scant enough: Victor Hugo is the "greatest living representative" of sentimentalism, and, "convinced that, as founder of the French Romantic School, there is a kind of family likeness between himself and Shakespeare, stands boldly forth to prove the father as extravagant as the son."[1] Sainte-Beuve makes his subject luminous[2]; Balzac (who gets no mention in his works) is said in his letters to yield "to the temptation of melodrama" and to be inferior to Charles de Bernard in knowledge of the great world.[3]

In English literature Lowell has turned his attention somewhat to the nineteenth century and has come down beyond Keats and Wordsworth to consider a few of his contemporaries. But *Carlyle*, *Thoreau*, *Swinburne*, and *Landor* were by no means his most important essays either in length or in

[1] *Works*, iii., 63. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 166. [3] *Letters*, ii., 429.

soundness of judgment. His attention was centred upon established classics and that attention, as shown in his essays, was for the most part devoted to the classics of English literature in the domain of poetry.

From Chaucer down his essays on the great poets form a history of English poetical literature. Beginning with Chaucer he has sketched that poet's sources "for poetical suggestion or literary culture: the Latins, the Troubadours, the Trouvères, and the Italians," and in the course of the essay touches on Gower and Langland. In *Spenser* he goes into a consideration of English poetry from the death of Chaucer to the rise of Spenser. The fifteenth century is a barren waste to Lowell's mind. "On the whole, Scottish poetry of the fifteenth century has more meat in it than the English," and he pauses to consider Dunbar, Barbour, and Gawain Douglas. He then takes up Skelton, Gascoigne, Wyatt, and Surrey, whose verse is "flat, thin, and regular," touches on the ballad, discusses Sidney, bestows considerable space and praise on Drayton and Daniel, and then, after this rapid survey in twenty pages, is ready for a lengthy consideration of Spenser. Taking up next the study of Shakespeare, Lowell touches upon the condition of things in the poet's time: the exhilaration which followed the Reformation, the dissemination of knowledge through printing, the stimulus of discovery across the virgin seas,—

those influences, in a word, which went to make the English nation vibrant with energy. The language was vital, the medium of expression for big hearts and keen brains; and in London among the set that created on the stage of the metropolis a new world of Fancy, Shakespeare got to know the very wellsprings of speech.[1] The moment was auspicious, says Lowell, and the greatest of poets came as the culmination of one of the greatest of literary eras. *Milton* follows and bridges over the seventeenth century between Shakespeare and Dryden. Lowell, with his eye on Masson, pays less attention than in the essays on Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare to connecting his poet with the preceding era. In *Dryden* he returns to the breadth of view of the literary historian. He points out that the author of *Absalom and Achitophel* had fallen upon an age when that moral disintegration was in process which was to result in scepticism; that Dryden was the "first of the moderns"; that he recognized the Time-Spirit and to a great extent worshipped at its shrine. In *Pope* the critic goes back to the Restoration, pointing out the imitation of "French manners, French morals, and, above all, French taste."[2] French taste and French principles of criticism triumphed in England, he declares, chiefly through the championship of Dryden.[3] But the upheaval of allegiance and political ideas had left English

[1] *Works*, iii., 7 ff. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 11. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 16.

minds open to the influx of new—and French—ideas. Precision and finesse usurped the place of imagination. Religion became a badge of party; scepticism lay at the root of faith.[1] We now have the age of Pope. Thus far, among the great English poets who preceded him, we have seen "actual life represented by Chaucer, imaginative life by Spenser, ideal life by Shakespeare, the interior life by Milton; . . . conventional life . . . found or made a most fitting [poet] in Pope."[2]

In *Gray*, Lowell gives a backward glance at Milton and at Dryden who, though only twenty-three years younger than Milton, "belongs to another world." Dryden, already the subject of an earlier essay, is too interesting a figure in Lowell's eyes to be passed over in silence, and after touching on his style and his manner, the critic points out the self-satisfaction, the moral elbowroom, the acceptance of things as they are, which belonged to the eighteenth century. With all its supposed lack of inspiration, the century produced Addison and Pope, Fielding and Sterne, Goldsmith and Gray. "Toward the middle of the century . . . two books were published . . . Dodsley's *Old Plays* (1744) and Percy's *Ballads* (1765)," which "gave the first impulse to the romantic reaction against a miscalled classicism, and were the seed of the literary renaissance."[3]

[1] *Works*, iv., 19. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 25. [3] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 12.

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Wordsworth and *Keats* bring the history of English poetic literature into the nineteenth century.

All this is of value and one gets from a study of these essays a wide general view of the history of English poetical literature from Chaucer down. One feels throughout that Lowell has read every poet he discusses, however far he may be from the main highway of poetry. But one may charge the critic with vagueness of expression if not of thought, with lack of consecuity in arrangement of matter, with contradictions, omissions, and errors which one finds it sometimes difficult to distinguish as of fact or of judgment. He speaks, for example, of the "amalgamation of the Saxon, Norman, and scholarly elements of English" being brought about by the Elizabethan stage, and declares that Shakespeare was "doubly fortunate" in being "Saxon by the father and Norman by the mother."[1] One draws the inference that there still existed about the last quarter of the sixteenth century a divorce between the Saxon and Norman elements in blood and speech. One feels awakened in one's mind an uncomfortable doubt about Lowell's historical accuracy; a conviction that he had forgotten Chaucer, in whom "we see the first result of the Norman yeast upon the home-baked Saxon loaf," and who "found his native tongue a dialect and left it a language."[2] In *Dryden*, the critic gives a false impression of the

[1] *Works*, iii., 7.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 321 and 329.

facts of literary history when he says: "In 1678, the public mind had so far recovered its [moral] tone that Dryden's comedy of *Limberham* was barely tolerated for three nights." To leave this statement uncircumstanced is to make it almost impossible to understand how Vanbrugh's *Relapse* could have triumphed on the London stage in 1696. In *Pope* Lowell first discusses the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century; then turns for a page to Pope who was lauded by Voltaire and whose fame was European; then refers to continental Romanticism; next discusses the school of Boileau, a topic which reminds him that "a century earlier the School of Cultists had established a dominion." The Cultists next engage his attention; they had their day and "went down before the implacable good sense of French criticism"; an analogy exists between cultism and the style of Pope, for whose arrival "circumstances had prepared the way." Then follows a discussion of the Restoration, of English sensitiveness to ridicule as shown even in Shakespeare's time, and of Caroline licentiousness. Next Dryden is taken up and the sceptical turn of the later seventeenth century; the influence of French criticism on the English literature of the day is gone into, correctness is touched on, and at last, after twenty-four pages, we come to the main point—a consideration of Pope. Such lack of consecuity does not impugn Lowell's knowledge,

which in its important phases is sound; but it does tend to lessen its value to the reader, who not unnaturally comes to suspect as but partially assimilated that knowledge which is presented in so confused a way.

Sins of omission and errors of fact are not wanting in Lowell. The importance of the *Lyrical Ballads* is passed over with the remark that they attempted a reform in poetry.[1] The famous Prefaces gain no consideration beyond the statement that Wordsworth shifted his ground somewhat in theory and notably in practice.[2] Lowell says nothing about Wordsworth's place in that Romantic Movement which, taking its rise during the eighteenth century, turned to the full tide at the beginning of the nineteenth. The place which belongs to Wordsworth in the forefront of the movement is given to Keats, who is called "the first resolute and wilful heretic, the true founder of the modern school, which admits no cis-Elizabethan authority save Milton."[3] It would be interesting to know on what grounds Lowell would defend this concession to Keats to the exclusion of Coleridge and Wordsworth. He is constantly expressing opinions which he lays down with a finality as of fact. When he says, "Dryden was the first Englishman who wrote perfectly easy

[1] *Works*, iv., 302. [2] *Ibid.*, i., 245.

[3] *Ibid.*, iii., 98. In *Works*, i., 245, he says that Keats' reaction was an "unconscious expression."

prose,"[1] one wonders why he ignored Cowley. But such lapses belong properly to another chapter. They are valuable in this place only as showing that Lowell's knowledge—and there can be no question of its amplitude—did not save him from error.

Errors of fact or of judgment did not come from ignorance of other critical dicta than his own. One finds echoes of De Quincey, of Lamb, and of Hazlitt, and so many of Coleridge as to convince one that Lowell had steeped his mind in the work of that master of criticism. Sometimes it is a hint of Coleridge's which Lowell uses, as when he compares Spenser and Bunyan in their allegories. Coleridge, in speaking of Spenser, refers to Bunyan and says that "in the *Pilgrim's Progress* . . . the characters are real persons with nicknames."[2] Says Lowell: "The vast superiority of Bunyan over Spenser lies in the fact that we help make his allegory out of our own experience."[3] The essays on Wordsworth and Shakespeare are under constant obligation to Coleridge. Coleridge speaks of the "frequent *curiosa felicitas* of his (Wordsworth's) diction," as a "beauty . . . eminently characteristic of his poetry."[4] Says Lowell: Wordsworth's work is endowed "with an unexpectedness and impressiveness of originality such as we feel in the presence of Nature

[1] *Works*, ii., 221. [2] Coleridge's *Works*, iv., 247 and 248.
[3] Lowell's *Works*, iv., 322. [4] Coleridge's *Works*, iii., 491.

herself"; this is "a peculiarity of his."[1] Speaking of Wordsworth in another place Coleridge says: He uses "thoughts and images too great for the subject."[2] Says Lowell, after quoting from *Peter Bell:* "One cannot help thinking that the similes of the huge stone, the sea beast, and the cloud, . . . are somewhat too lofty for the service to which they are put."[3] In *Shakespeare*, Lowell's indebtedness is none the less evident. Coleridge calls Prospero "the very Shakespeare himself, of the tempest."[4] Lowell asks: "In Prospero shall we not recognize the Artist himself [Shakespeare]?"[5] Says Coleridge: "In other writers we find the particular opinions of the individual; . . . but Shakespeare never promulgates any party tenets. He is always the philosopher and the moralist."[6] Says Lowell: "In estimating Shakespeare, it should never be forgotten, that . . . he was essentially observer and artist, and incapable of partisanship."[7]

To consider but one more critic to whom Lowell is under obligation. His declaration regarding character as "the only soil in which real mental power can root itself and find sustenance," recalls Carlyle's: "Who ever saw, or will see, any true talent, not to speak of genius, the foundation of

[1] Lowell's *Works*, iv., 407.
[2] Coleridge's *Works*, iii., 478.
[3] Lowell's *Works*, iv., 410.
[4] Coleridge's *Works*, iv., 75.
[5] Lowell's *Works*, iii., 61.
[6] Coleridge's *Works*, iv., 78.
[7] Lowell's *Works*, iii., 2.

which is not goodness, love?"[1] Says Carlyle: "Johnson's opinions are fast becoming obsolete: but his style of thinking and of living, we may hope, will never become obsolete."[2] Lowell probably had that in mind when he wrote: "It is as a nobly original man, even more than as an original thinker, that Lessing is precious to us, and that he is so considerable in German literature. In a higher sense, but in the same kind, he is to Germans what Dr. Johnson is to us,—admirable for what he was."[3] Considering Rousseau the sentimentalist and finding it difficult to account for his undeniable influence, Lowell exclaims: "Surely there must have been a basis of sincerity in this man seldom matched."[4] Says Carlyle: "With all his drawbacks . . . [Rousseau] has the first and chief characteristic of a hero: he is heartily in *earnest*."[5] And so one might go on.

One would hesitate to draw the conclusion that Lowell consciously borrowed.[6] He was, as a matter of fact, scrupulous about literary borrowing although it was a favorite belief of his that an idea belonged to him who expressed it best. His reading was enormous and he doubtless unconsciously assimilated phrases and dicta and com-

[1] Carlyle's *Works*, xvi., 467.
[2] *Ibid.*, xiv., 404.
[3] Lowell's *Works*, ii., 229.
[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 237.
[5] Carlyle's *Works*, xiv., 406.
[6] He is charged with plagiarism in an article in *Lippincott's*, vol. vii., p. 641 ff.

parisons which grew into his consciousness as his own possessions. For borrowings however on the part of others, especially of words and turns of phrase, Lowell had a sense so keen as to amount almost to an obsession. The following is typical; he quotes Dryden's lines:

"And threatening France, placed like a painted Jove,
Kept idle thunder in his lifted hand,"

and adds in a footnote:

Perhaps the hint was given by a phrase of Corneille, *monarque en peinture*. Dryden . . . borrowed a great deal. Thus in *Don Sebastian* (of suicide):

"Brutus and Cato might discharge their souls,
And give them furloughs for the other world;
But we, like sentries, are obliged to stand
In starless nights and wait the appointed hour."

The thought is Cicero's, but how it is intensified by the "starless nights"! Dryden, I suspect, got it from his favorite, Montaigne, who says, "Que nous ne pouvons abandonner cette garnison du monde, sans le commandement exprez de celuy qui nous y a mis." (L. ii., Chap. 3.) In the same play, by a very Dryden-ish verse, he gives new force to an old comparison:

"And I should break through laws divine and human,
And think 'em cobwebs spread for little man,
Which all the bulky herd of Nature breaks."[1]

[1] *Works*, iii., 141.

There is an interesting and tempting play for the analogical side of memory in this sort of "hunting of the letter," but the genuine value of it is more than doubtful. Its absurdity becomes apparent in such a case as that where Lowell, referring to Dryden's "painted Jove," suspects "that this noble image was suggested by a verse in *The Double Marriage* [of Beaumont and Fletcher]—'Thou woven Worthy in a piece of arras.' "[1] This tendency of Lowell's adds new proof—if any were wanting—of the range of his reading and of his keen sense for the "minutiæ of verbal criticism."

This sense found a more profitable channel when, supported by his intimate and wide acquaintance with languages and by his remarkable memory, it was directed into the field of linguistics. Lowell's knowledge of linguistics was derived from diligent reading in the classics of language. To him language was nothing if not intensely alive. And a "living language" with Lowell meant one "that is still hot from the hearts and brains of a people, not hardened yet, but moltenly ductile to new shapes of sharp and clean relief in the moulds of new thought."[2] As a student of linguistics, his most thorough-going efforts appear in *Library of Old Authors* and in the introduction to Part II of the *Biglow Papers*. There is no call to go into a minute examination of the etymolo-

[1] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 18 (note). [2] *Works*, iii., 6.

gies which Lowell discusses. What most concerns our present study is that he grasped some important principles which lie at the root of the science of language and that he applied them in an illuminating way in many of his essays.

> It is only from its roots in the living generations of men that a language can be reinforced with fresh vigor for its needs. . . . No language after it has faded into *diction*, none that cannot suck up the feeding juices secreted for it in the rich mother-earth of common folk, can bring forth a sound and lusty book. True vigor and heartiness of phrase do not pass from page to page, but from man to man, where the brain is kindled and the lips suppled by downright living interests and by passion in its very throe.[1]

Another principle which he has applied in tracing etymology, is a regard for exact chronology; a third, the value of comparing later forms in order to infer earlier ones. It is the first principle with which Lowell was most concerned and on which he was never tired of insisting. Of Dryden, to whose prose he gives unfailing praise, he says: "What he did in his best writing was to use the English as if it were a spoken, and not merely an inkhorn language."[2] Again: "[Language's] being alive is all that gives it poetic value. We do not mean what is technically called a living language, . . . but one that is still hot from the hearts and

[1] *Poetical Works*, ii., 159.

[2] *Works*, iii., 185.

brains of a people."[1] The motto of poets should be, he adds, "The tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar." With this principle in mind, he never fails to discuss in an illuminating way the diction of poets and the growth of his mother tongue. His knowledge of words enabled him to take issue with Masson regarding several points in Milton's versification and to invoke in support of his contentions Shakespeare, Dekker, Donne, Italian usage, and Milton himself. His interest is not due to a desire to quibble, but rather to defend Milton and the Elizabethans and especially Shakespeare from the charge of faulty versification. Chaucer as well as Shakespeare was too genuine a poet, to Lowell's mind, to have left his prosody in a chaotic condition. In Chaucer's case he discusses final and medial *e*, the restoration of final *n* in the infinitive and third person plural of verbs, and plays the part of editor in scattered passages in a way to convince one of his judgment and his knowledge of versification.[2]

With commentators or editors who brought only imperfect qualifications to their task, he had little patience. Carelessness he regards, if possible, as even more inexcusable. After pointing out in *Library of Old Authors* various errors of W. C.

[1] *Works*, iii., 6.

[2] Lowell edited the text of Donne's poems, published by the Rowfant Club in 1895.

Hazlitt, he adds: "Where there is blundering to be done, one stone often serves Mr. Hazlitt for two birds," an amenity which is typical of his attitude throughout the paper. And yet Lowell himself, like Homer, sometimes nods. It is pointed out that he attributes to Shakespeare the lines of Richard Barnfield:

> "King Pandion he is dead;
> All thy friends are lapt in lead."[1]

Devotee of Shakespeare as he was, such a slip is all the more surprising.[2] He speaks of our being "the miserable forked radish, to which the bitter scorn of Lear degraded every child of Adam,"[3] whereas even Macaulay's schoolboy knows it is honest Jack Falstaff, not Lear, who may claim the phrase. He misquotes Prior's *Abra*[4] and Daniel, xii., 3.[5] These last three lapses occur in addresses, which, however, must have been revised before publication. In essays written directly for the press he sometimes misquotes,[6] and by a

[1] Greenslet, p. 291.

[2] Commenting on the American slang "to let slide," Lowell points out that it occurs in Heywood's *Edward IV.*, etc., but says nothing about its occurrence in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. *Vide* Introduction to *Biglow Papers*, p. 188.

[3] *Works*, vi., 80. [4] *Ibid.*, vi., 72. [5] *Ibid.*, vi., 98.

[6] For misquotations of Goldsmith, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare, *vide A Free Lance*, p. 150 ff. Lowell misquotes Burns in *Conversations*, p. 174, and assigns a quotation from Dekker to Middleton in *Early Writings*, p. 244.

strange irony he is guilty of two slips in the case of final *e* in quoting Chaucer and that after demanding careful consideration for *e* as important in determining versification. His fondness for minute criticism gets to some extent its revenge. Slips in the vernacular were pet objects of his attack; he corrects Masson's "dislike to"; sneers at Hazlitt for speaking of the "delineation of a point"; questions Halliwell about a relative whose antecedent is vague.[1]

When the question concerned literature, Lowell could be insistent on minute points with better grace than when history or science or art was under discussion. His interest was vastly more devoted to letters than to kindred subjects and the result was unfortunate. One thinks how effective his *Shakespeare* might have been made, if Elizabethan England with its splendid vigor had been boldly drawn, that England when men flung velvet cloaks before the feet of their Virgin Queen; when lusty mariners, who might have dared the terrors of strange seas with Drake or Frobisher, thronged the Globe to see old Shylock rage or Romeo die; when the wits of Oxford and Cambridge could live their dissolute lives, write masterpieces, and meet death in a brothel. Knowing history, he might have pictured the England of Elizabeth or of Chaucer or of the Restoration with that vivid-

[1] Sentences occur in Lowell not uncommonly, whose syntax is baffling if not quite indefensible.

ness so gripping in the studies of Macaulay. His *Chaucer*, his *Shakespeare*, his *Dryden*, and the rest leave the poets too far aloof from their times; or rather to Lowell their existence in literature and in history are things apart. One recalls such an essay as Macaulay's on the *Dramatists of the Restoration* and at once that society which Dryden knew, dissolute, voluptuous, debonair, flashes on one's mind and makes the literature of the reign of the second Charles clear in a way which shames Lowell's mere statement: "Charles II. had brought back with him from exile French manners, French morals, and above all French taste." And Milton's England! Lowell must devote over a third of his essay on Milton to flaying Masson—too easy prey—while those pregnant days when King and Parliament grew tense for the death-grapple; and a great nation was rent with Civil War; and Puritan prayed and Cavalier sang; and Falkland and Montrose fought and died the death; and Oliver won Marston Moor and Dunbar and came to dominate England for a generation—those great days when John Milton's blood tingled through his veins, seem to have lain, as far as Lowell was concerned, hidden in the dust of the past. A knowledge of history would have given his critical essays a far greater value; they would have been more consecutive in tracing literary movements, more convincing and clear because showing the interactions of literary with his-

torical changes; and finally more vital, because the author discussed would appear as a part of his age and not merely as a superman set against a nebulous background.

At the age of twenty-six, writing to a friend, Lowell speaks of having gone into many out-of-the-way books, without having glanced at others which every one had read. "For example, I have read books on magic and astrology and yet never looked into a History of England."[1] It has already been suggested that one gets from Lowell's treatment of literary development the impression that his ideas of history were vague. He seems to believe, for instance, that the gallicism of the Restoration impregnated the English nation, instead of making it clear that its influence centred in the capital, the court, and such literary men as came within the sphere of court influence.[2] In speaking of the low standards of morality and honor which prevailed in England in the age which was supplanting Milton's, he says: It was an age

> when men could . . . swear one allegiance and keep on safe terms with the other, when prime-ministers and commanders-in-chief could be intelligencers of the Pretender, nay, when even Algernon Sidney himself could be a pensioner of France.[3]

[1] *Letters*, i., 90.
[2] *Works*, iv., Essay on Pope.
[3] *Ibid.*, iv., 19.

While Lowell has not made here any positive misstatement, the confusion in the implication is great. He has started out to speak of the age which was supplanting Milton's. The introduction of the Pretender shifts the focus from the Restoration to the age of Anne, and the reader recalls with a shock of surprise that Sidney, introduced on the heels of the "intelligencers of the Pretender," was dead five years before James Stuart was born.[1] One reads with similar feelings, "For Italy Dante is the thirteenth century."[2] It is a question how much Italian history must have gone unwritten if Innocent III. and St. Francis of Assisi had not impregnated their generation with their ideas.

In his essay on Carlyle, Lowell goes into German history in discussing Frederick the Great; he does not persuade one of the accuracy of his knowledge or of the justice of his opinions. His attitude toward Frederick may be gathered from one sentence which bears eloquent testimony that the critic's view of history was that of the mere man of letters:

> Frederick had certainly more of the temperament of genius than Marlborough or Wellington; but, not to go beyond modern instances, he does not impress

[1] Sidney, 1622–1683; James Francis Edward Stuart, the Pretender, born 1688.

[2] *Works*, iv., 237.

us with the massive breadth of Napoleon, or attract us with the climbing ardor of Turenne.[1]

In the matter of science, Lowell was even farther afield. He writes in 1878: "Not that I like science any better than I ever did. I hate it as a savage does writing, because he fears it will hurt him somehow."[2] Eight years later he wrote a paper called *The Progress of the World*, to introduce a work "in which the advance in various departments of intellectual and material activity was described and illustrated." Here if anywhere one would expect something approaching the scientific, something concrete and specific. Lowell recognized his limitations and felt amused at having been asked to contribute an introduction to such a work. Speaking of the earth he writes:

Beginning as a nebulous nucleus of fiery gases, a luminous thistle-down blown about the barren wastes of space, then slowly shrinking, compacting, growing solid, and cooling at the rind, our planet was forced into a system with others like it, some smaller, some

[1] *Works*, ii., 114. *Vide* an article in *Lippincott's*, vol. vii., probably by John Forster Kirke, who takes issue with Lowell on his views of Frederick.

[2] *Letters*, ii., 230. Science to Lowell's mind seems the foe of religion: "I think the evolutionists will have to make a fetich of their protoplasm before long. Such a mush seems to me a poor substitute for the Rock of Ages." *Letters*, ii., 245. Cf. *Credidimus Jovem Regnare* and *Turner's Old Téméraire*, *Poetical Works*, iv.

vastly greater, than itself, and, in its struggle with overmastering forces, having the moon wrenched from it to be its night-lamp and the timer of its tides."

This is the expression of a man standing poles apart from science, from scientific knowledge, and the scientific point of view.[1]

Although, as has been pointed out, Lowell knew his classics and was a believer in their cultural value, he was strangely unimpressed by the beauty of Greek art. While on an excursion to Greece in the spring of 1878, he wrote that the town was "shabby" and "modern" and that he was "for turning about and going straight back again." Though he pays a visit to the Parthenon and to the Acropolis he is interested for the most part in noting that the Grecian coast is "even grimmer" than that of New England; that it seemed odd for the newsboys to cry the newspapers in Greek; that the Thessalian insurgents "reminded him of Macaulay's Highlanders." He wrote home to Norton, "I prefer Gothic to Grecian architecture." He had already confessed in the *Cathedral,*

> The Grecian gluts me with its perfectness.

His preference for Gothic over Greek art was nothing new or sudden, for back in 1854 he wrote,

[1] It is interesting to note that Lowell attended lectures in Dresden on the natural sciences and even assisted at the anatomical classes. *Vide* Scudder, i., 382.

"There is nothing in ancient art to match Shakespeare or a Gothic minster."[1]

Sculpture Lowell scarcely mentions. In his essay on Dante, he says of Florence, "For her the Pisani [wrought] who divined . . . the Greek supremacy in sculpture." With what seems like half-hearted interest he says, "In art . . . Rome is wondrously rich especially in sculpture." Painting interests him more,[2] though his taste and opinions are often surprising. He wonders if Michael Angelo has not "cocked his hat a little wee bit too much"; "Claude is great, but he had no imagination"; "to me he (Titian) is the greatest of the painters." His fondness for Titian leads him into amusing superlatives; "I think . . . [Titian's *Assumption*] the most splendid piece of color in the world"; "Titian's *Tribute Money* is marvelously great"; "I made up my mind that I would rather have it (a portrait by Titian) than any other picture in the world—yes, rather than my favorite *Presentation of the Virgin* in Venice."[3] Seeing Albert Dürer's portrait of the Emperor

[1] *Works*, i., 212. In *Works*, iv., 233, he says: "The Greek temple . . . leaves nothing to hope for in unity and perfection of design, in harmony and subordination of parts, and in entireness of impression. But in this æsthetic completeness it ends. It rests solidly and complacently on the earth and the mind rests there with it."

[2] In 1852, after returning from Italy, Lowell writes, "I have studied Art to some purpose." *Letters*, i., 195.

[3] *Letters*, i., 234.

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Maximilian at three, he is interested because the child has "an apple in his hand instead of the globe of empire." At the Louvre, his attention is caught by a portrait of Lady Venetia Digby by Van Dyke, because it is "the likeness of a woman who had inspired so noble and enduring a love in so remarkable a man as Sir Kenelm."[1] Lowell was obviously alive to the plastic arts merely as a man of letters; he travelled, observed, and read, but failed to regard other arts than literature from the point of view which belonged to them.

In trying to penetrate Turner and Frederick the Great, he looked at them from the same point of view as that from which he regarded Shakespeare and demanded of the painter and the soldier the possession of such imaginative powers as he discovered in the poet. His superlative admiration for Titian with his wonderful command of color, his depreciation of Greek architecture with its perfection of form, betray weaknesses in himself. His critical essays are not perfect units like the Greek temple; and though they possess the superabundant ornament of the Gothic Cathedral they lack its fundamental unity of design. Lowell executes his gargoyles and flying buttresses, but forgets the unified body to which these are merely ornaments or supports. The glowing colors of Titian which captivate his fancies recall those

[1] *Letters*, i., 235.

purple patches of his own which sometimes dazzle us and make us forgetful of defects.

These deficiencies of Lowell were unfortunate. A knowledge of art and science and history would have served to crystallize many of his vague notions; to send the current of his literary knowledge into parallel channels with other phases of men's interests and endeavors, and so made that current deeper and broader and clearer.

CHAPTER III

LOWELL'S SYMPATHY: ITS BREADTH AND LIMITATIONS

LOWELL'S chief interest, as has been pointed out, centred in the classics of language—in those works which the consensus of opinion had passed upon as having been tried and not found wanting. It almost never came into Lowell's mind—one must remember that he was a conservative—to challenge their possession of the prime qualities. It was enough for him that they had survived by possessing elements of lastingness which all men conceded to them. His keenest interest concerned the greater rather than the lesser classics, Dante rather than Petrarch or Boccaccio, Shakespeare rather than Pope. It is true that Homer appears in his works far less than the Greek dramatists. But Homer offered no opportunity for direct comparison with any poet whom Lowell treated except Milton. Such a comparison would necessarily be limited and would make prominent the virtues of Homer rather than those of Milton. The Greek drama-

tists Lowell could set over against Shakespeare, emphasizing the differences and suggesting conclusions in favor of the English poet. The critic's attitude of appreciation of the beauties of Greek literature cannot be doubted, but nothing in Greek appealed to him with the force of Shakespeare or Dante or Chaucer or Cervantes or Calderon. His interest in these latter poets was nothing short of enthusiastic devotion. Latin literature he regarded from the popular point of view, that is, as largely derivative; "always a half-hardy exotic," he calls it. Though he concedes medieval influence to Ovid, originality to Horace, a profound imagination to Lucretius, and supreme elegance to Virgil, his attitude toward Latin literature is summed up in his declaration that it maintained an "ordinary level of tasteful common-sense."[1]

In the field of those literatures which were written in living languages and those languages the media of expression for some of the greatest of world poets, Lowell's interest becomes deep. To him Dante is "the founder of modern literature." The great Italian appealed to him powerfully just as he did to Lowell's friends, Longfellow and Norton. The *Dante* was written only after twenty years of study. In seriousness, comprehensiveness, and devotion to minute detail it is Lowell's most important work in criticism. It would

[1] *Works*, iii., 306.

seem as if Dante absorbed his intellectual energies to so supreme a degree that he had little left to bestow on the other important figures of Italian literature. In the critic's mind Dante probably made Petrarch and Boccaccio, Ariosto and Tasso, appear dwarfed in comparison. In his single excursion into the field of French literature, Lowell concerned himself with Rousseau. He thought of the works of Corneille and of Racine as "sham-classic pastures . . . where a colonnade supplies the dearth of herbage."[1] To Lessing alone among the Germans he devoted an essay. Whether the critic's avoidance of Goethe were deliberate or not, one cannot assume to say. But his election of the secondary author was not unfortunate. Goethe, unlike Lessing, did not present to the critic a comparatively simple study, but one of many complexities. How adequate might have been Lowell's treatment of Goethe may be later apparent when the question of his methods of handling such complex problems has been discussed.

Although to Lowell, Shakespeare was emphatically the dominant figure in English literature, he did not on that account exclude the lesser poets from studious consideration. English was, after all, the language of Lowell's most intimate knowledge, a heritage, not an acquirement, and in devoting study to the great figures of its litera-

[1] *Letters*, ii., 46.

ture, he found place for such secondary writers as Pope and Dryden.

In giving attention chiefly to English writers, Lowell concentrated on the poets. He always held the poetic calling sacred. The poet's ought to be

> "the song, which, in its metre holy,
> Chimes with the music of the eternal stars,
> Humbling the tyrant, lifting up the lowly,
> And sending sun through the soul's prison-bars."[1]

As his letters attest, it was with his own poetry rather than with his prose that Lowell was most concerned. A poet himself, it was but natural that he should study the greatest names of a brotherhood of which he could reckon himself a member. His studies of prose writers are less happy than those of poets, and his phrasing of dicta frequently persuades the reader that he is regarding the author discussed as poet rather than as prose writer. He says of Carlyle, to take but one example:

> With a conceptive imagination vigorous beyond any in his generation, with a mastery of language equalled only by the greatest poets, he wants altogether the plastic imagination, the shaping faculty, which would have made him a poet in the highest sense.[2]

[1] *Poetical Works*, i., 34. Cf. *Letters*, i., 104; *Works*, iv., 357, 262 ff.

[2] *Works*, ii., 90.

Dealing with Shakespeare and Dante and Chaucer, and even with Lessing and Rousseau and Dryden, Lowell was treating in every case a man whose position as a great fact in the history of his national literature stood beyond cavil. With such men in mind, Lowell could give his definition of a classic:

> A classic is properly a book which maintains itself by virtue of that happy coalescence of matter and style, that innate and exquisite sympathy between the thought that gives life and the form that consents to every mood of grace and dignity, which can be simple without being vulgar, elevated without being distant, and which is something neither ancient nor modern, always new and incapable of growing old.[1]

What attitude will Lowell maintain towards these classics of language? To "measure an author fairly," he holds, one must take him on the strongest side, "for the higher wisdom of criticism lies in the capacity to admire."[2] Reading Lowell's essays on the classics, one can doubt neither his capacity to admire nor his possession of that sympathy without which such capacity were impossible. Of Dante the man he can say, "Dante is the highest spiritual nature that has expressed itself in rhythmical form."[3] Reviewing the Italian poet's works, he can study all with keen interest and bestow on them the ample praise of a sym-

[1] *Works*, iv., 266. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 140. [3] *Ibid.* iv., 263.

pathetic mind. The *Canzoni* he finds admirable for "elegance, variety of rhythm, and fervor of sentiment"[1]; the *Vita Nuova* is incomparable "as a contribution to the physiology of genius"[2]; the *Convito* "is an epitome of the learning of that age, philosophical, theological, and scientific"[3]; *De Vulgari Eloquio* is incomplete but is of "great glossological value" and "conveys the opinions of Dante"; *De Monarchia* is valuable for helping us towards a "broader view of him as a poet," though compared with the political treatises of Aristotle and Spinoza, it shows the "limitations of the age in which he lived."[4] The *Commedia* "remains one of the three or four universal books that have ever been written."[5]

For the age as well as for Dante and his works Lowell seems to have no difficulty in getting the point of view of appreciative understanding: "I am not ashamed to confess a singular sympathy with what are known as the Middle Ages. I cannot help thinking that few periods have left behind them such traces of inventiveness and power."[6] Lowell was keenly alive to the good as well as to the evil of the Middle Ages. Dante's was a "time of fierce passions and sudden tragedies, of picturesque transitions and contrasts." In that era "a whole century seems like a mere wild chaos. Yet during a couple of such centuries

[1] *Works*, iv., 229. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 148. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 154.
[4] *Ibid.*, iv., 153 (note). [5] *Ibid.*, iv., 165. [6] *Ibid.*, i., 212.

the cathedrals of Florence, Pisa, and Sienna got built; Cimabue, Giotto, Arnolfo, the Pisani, Brunelleschi, and Ghiberti gave the impulse to modern art . . .; modern literature took its rise; commerce became a science, and the middle class came into being."[1] However general all this may be, it at least proves Lowell's sympathetic attitude towards medieval times. The man Dante as well as his age and his works meets with a like sympathy on Lowell's part: "In all literary history there is no such figure as Dante, no such homogeneousness of life and works, such loyalty to ideas, such sublime irrecognition of the unessential."[2]

With a sympathy broad enough to extend from Shakespeare to Dante and his age, it seems surprising that Lowell should say: "The whole of Europe during the fifteenth century produced no book which has continued readable, or has become in any sense of the word, a classic."[3] Not only in this century but in the sixteenth century as well, England was to Lowell a literary desert. Yet his sympathy was warm for those two great poets between whose lofty genius those two centuries stretched. Indeed Lowell's attitude of appreciative understanding, so marked in the case of Dante, could hardly fail when he came to consider the great figures of his own language. Chaucer's is a "pervading wholesomeness"; a humor which "pervades his comic tales like sun-

[1] *Works*, iv., 126, 127. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 162. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 266.

shine"; and a "gracious worldliness."[1] Spenser's style is "costly"; on reading him one passes "through emotion into revery"; for "to read him is like dreaming awake," and he knew "how to color his dreams like life and make them move before you in music."[2] Shakespeare was great in imagination and fancy, in perspicacity and artistic discretion; in judgment and poise of character he was "the greatest of poets."[3] Milton, who like Dante "believed himself divinely inspired," reflects in his maturer poems "a sublime independence of human sympathy," a phase of strength which Lowell could admire the more because conscious of its lack in himself. Behind the critic's sympathetic understanding of these poets was not only that conservatism on his part which tended to make him take the classics for granted, but a perception of qualities on their part which appealed to him strongly. Such were "gracious worldliness"; a style which wafted one "through emotion into revery"; powerful imagination not divorced from "poise of character"; such lofty ethical purpose and idealization of the poetic calling as characterized Dante and Milton.

Towards the secondary English poets, Lowell does not fail in appreciation. Although Dryden to his mind "wanted that inspiration which comes of belief in and devotion to something nobler and

[1] *Works*, iii., 291 ff.

[2] *Ibid.*, iv., 334 ff. (*passim*).

[3] *Ibid.*, iii., 92.

more abiding than the present moment," a type of inspiration which the critic found in Dante and Spenser and Milton and which he could read readily into Chaucer and Shakespeare, still Lowell concedes him "the next best thing to that—a thorough faith in himself."[1] While admitting the slight value and the great immorality of Dryden's comedies, Lowell suggests palliations: he was "under contract to deliver three plays a year," and the age was dissolute.[2] Dryden's prose was admirable and possessed of suppleness and grace and familiar dignity.[3] The poet was "thoroughly manly," a fact which gives Lowell warrant for admiring him aside from his position as a classic. "Amid the rickety sentiment looming big through misty phrase which marks so much of modern literature, to read him is as bracing as a northwest wind."[4] Lowell would not suggest that Dryden had a place in the first rank of English poets. "Certainly he was not, like Spenser, the poets' poet, but other men have also their rights."[5] This last clause suggests aptly Lowell's gift of sympathy.

In *Pope* we find a frank avowal of Lowell's early attitude: "There was a time when I could not read Pope but disliked him on principle."[6] One recalls his youthful declaration: "When you

[1] *Works*, iii., 103. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 151. [3] *Ibid.*, iii., 129.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 189. [5] *Ibid.*, iii., 189. [6] *Ibid.*, iv., 26.

call him poet, you insult the buried majesty of all earth's noblest and choicest spirits."[1] One has a feeling that this utterance, though expressed when Lowell was but twenty-five, discloses an opinion which he never entirely abandoned. By 1855, there had crystallized to a considerable degree, that conservatism in Lowell which expressed itself towards literature as an acceptance of great writers in the light of general opinion. The views he held in 1855 regarding Pope were essentially those of his essay in the *North American Review* for January, 1871. He would not have us believe him prejudiced against Pope; since the early days of his dislike he has read the poet "carefully more than once. . . . If I have not come to the conclusion that he was the greatest of poets, I believe that I am at least in a condition to allow him every merit that is fairly his."[2] He condemns the *Dunciad* and finds that the *Essay on Man* is "shallow and contradictory." He praises the *Essay on Criticism*, declares that in his Moral Essays and parts of his Satires, "Pope must be allowed to have established a style of his own, in which he is without a rival,"[3] and grants that the *Rape of the Lock* is the "most perfect poem" of its kind "in the language."[4] But it must be confessed that one does not find in Lowell's essay

[1] *Conversations*, p. 5 ff.
[2] *Works*, iv., 26.
[3] *Ibid.*, iv., 44.
[4] *Ibid.*, iv., 56.

that ready sympathy for Pope which glows for the subjects of the studies which have just been considered. Pope in his eyes was the exemplar of an age which he calls "filthy" and "an age of sham."[1]

While there is no evidence that Lowell felt a like antagonism towards the nineteenth century and its writers, his sympathy for them seems to have been imperfect. None of his longer or more carefully done critical essays concerned writers of his own century with the exception of Keats and Wordsworth.[2] The *Keats* is rather biographical than critical. The *Wordsworth* concerns a poet who had done his best work in the decade following 1797 and whose qualities of genius had been pointed out in masterly chapters of the *Biographia Literaria*. Lowell's other studies of nineteenth-century writers cannot be classed among his best critical work. They are fragmentary and inadequate. It would seem as if the literature of the century had no very genuine interest for him. This is all the more remarkable when one recalls his interest in poetry and brings to mind the brilliant array of poets extending from Wordsworth and Coleridge down. In his youth, Lowell found that some parts of Byron brought tears to his eyes. But by 1843 he could

[1] *Works*, iv., 48, 19.

[2] *Keats* was published as an introduction to an edition of his poems. Lowell first wrote on Wordsworth for a similar purpose.

speak disparagingly of him in *Conversations*. Byron's feeling for nature marks him, says Lowell, as a child of Rousseau, who seems to have had a share in the English poet's tendency to sentimentalism. Byron made "motiveless despair" fashionable.[1] It is conceded by the critic that he was one of the "great names of the last generation," and that his "real strength lay in his sincerity."[2] There can be little doubt however that Lowell's last utterance on Byron was indicative of his real feelings: he confesses in 1889 to "an odd feeling of surprise that the framework of the fireworks . . . which so dazzled my youth should look so bare."[3]

It was as early as 1812 that Byron awoke to find himself famous; Shelley's reputation on the other hand gathered force with surprising slowness. To Lowell's mind Shelley is stilted.[4] He is a "mere poet," whose genius was a "St. Elmo's fire . . . playing in ineffectual flame about the points of his thought."[5] Though he has caught some of the pathos of the Elizabethans and has a fine feminine organization, he has a "fatal copiousness which is his vice."[4] Lowell mentions Shelley in a letter written in 1877 to deny him a share in restoring to the ode its harmony and shapeliness. At best he seems to have felt only

[1] *Works*, iv., 371.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 120; i., 100.
[3] *Letters*, ii., 386.
[4] *Works*, ii., 145.
[5] *Ibid.*, ii., 229.

an imperfect interest in that elusive spirit whose gift made him one of the supreme lyrists in the language.[1]

Of Clough, whom he came to know intimately, Lowell wrote: "He is a man of genius. . . . His *Bothie* is a rare and original poem."[2] He thinks Clough "imperfect . . . in many respects," but believes that his poetry "will one of these days, perhaps, be found to have been the best utterance in verse of this generation."[3] To the mind of a day some forty years later than Lowell's expression of opinion, several other Victorian poets seem to have a less uncertain claim on the attention of the next generation than Clough.

Lowell's early opinion of Tennyson was highly complimentary. He wrote a review of the *Princess* in 1848 in which he expressed his unqualified admiration.[4] The tone of the review may be gathered from the following sentences:

> We read the book through with a pleasure which heightened to unqualified delight, and ended in admiration. The poem is unique in conception and execution. It is one of those few instances in literature where a book is so true to the idiosyncrasy of its author that we cannot conceive of the possibility

[1] Lowell wrote (1857) on Shelley as an introduction to an edition of his poems. The essay is slight and biographical with no attempt at criticism.

[2] *Letters*, i., 201 and 202.

[3] *Works*, ii., 121, and iii., 243.

[4] *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* for March, 1848.

of its being written by any other person, no matter how gifted.[1]

In 1855 he writes that *Maud* is "wonderfully fine."[2] But his early enthusiasm seems to cool as his conservatism hardens with the years. Though he finds that Tennyson has caught some of the simple pathos of the Elizabethans' music, and has been "the greatest artist in words . . . since Gray,"[3] his "dainty trick . . . cloys when caught by a whole generation of versifiers as the *style* of a great poet never can be."[4] The knights of the *Idylls* are "cloudy, gigantic, of no age or country."[5] The *Idylls* themselves are imitative, not "reality . . . but a masquerade."[6] These mature dicta are noticeably different in tone from the earlier judgments: it is not Lowell's enthusiasm for literature which has cooled, but his sympathy for the literary output of his own day.

As with Tennyson, so with Browning. In 1848 Lowell, while finding *Sordello* "totally incomprehensible as a connected whole," declared that the pieces in *Bells and Pomegranates* were "works of

[1] "The design of the *Princess*," he says, "is novel. The movement of the poem is epic, yet it is redolent, not of Homer and Milton, but of the busy nineteenth century." These are curiously like his words on Clough's *Bothie* (*Letters*, i., 202). Cf. the above quoted judgment on the *Princess* with that on Shakespeare in *Works*, iii., 36.

[2] *Letters*, i., 235. [3] *Ibid.*, ii., 86.

[4] *Works*, ii., 121. [5] *Ibid.*, v., 242. Cf. *Letters*, ii., 85 ff.

[6] *Letters*, ii., 85. Cf. *Works*, ii., 132.

art in the truest sense," that the author's dramatic power was "rare," and that he had "in him the elements of greatness."[1] Lowell's subsequent indifference seems strange when we read: "To us he appears to have wider range and greater freedom of movement than any other of the younger English poets." Later, in 1866, the critic declared that Browning, "by far the richest nature of his time, . . . becomes more difficult, draws nearer to the all-for-point fashion of the *concettisti*, with every poem he writes."[2] In one of his English addresses, delivered in 1883, Lowell referred to him as "a great living poet who has in his own work illustrated every form of imagination."[3] Six years later in an American address his tone seems to be one of impatience. He quotes Browning as saying in the Preface to his translation of the *Agamemnon*, "Learning Greek teaches Greek and nothing else." The critic comments: "One is sometimes tempted to think that it teaches some other language far harder than Greek when one tries to read his translation."[4]

William Morris is unmentioned in Lowell's works, although he may lay claim to consideration

[1] *Vide North American Review*, April, 1848.

[2] *Works*, ii., 121. [3] *Ibid.*, vi., 54.

[4] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 145. That Lowell's interest flagged in the maturer years following his warmly appreciative article in the *North American Review* gains color from the experience of Mr. Moncure Conway who writes that Lowell (in 1858) "showed no interest in Browning." *Vide* Greenslet, p. 107.

as a descendant by no means unworthy of the greatest of English narrative poets. Rossetti the critic praises for his translations from the early Italian poets. One suspects the source of Lowell's interest on reading: "Mr. Rossetti would do a real and lasting service to literature by employing his singular gift in putting Dante's minor poems into English."[1] True he mentions Rossetti in a letter written in 1858, but adds that he has "not yet made up his mind" about the poet. With Swinburne, to whose tragedies he devoted a paper in 1866, he was quite out of sympathy. *Chastelard* "is at best but the school exercise of a young poet learning to write."[2] *Atalanta* he concedes "is a true poem," but it is "a world of shadows," and betrays "a poverty of thought and confusion of imagery." All things considered, "it gives promise of rare achievement hereafter."[3] But an *obiter dictum* which one finds in an article by Lowell somewhat more than a year later, lets us into the secret of his real attitude. Speaking of indifferent critics, he says: "Their . . . universal solvent serves equally for the lead of Tupper or the brass of Swinburne."[4] It is worth noting that after five years spent in the great cosmopolis

[1] *Works*, iv., 229 (note). [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 122.

[3] *Works*, ii., 123, 126.

[4] *Vide North American Review* for October, 1867, article "Winthrop Papers." Cf. *Among My Books* (i., 273) with *Works*, ii., 56.

of London, Lowell in the revised edition of his works omitted that sentence. One may be permitted to suspect that tact rather than sympathy suggested the omission.

On Matthew Arnold as a poet there is little in Lowell. While declaring that he sets "a high value on Mr. Arnold and his poetic gift," he finds *Merope* "without color, without harmonious rhythm of movement," passionless and dull.[1] It is a question whether Lowell would have said that "a hundred years hence" Clough would be thought "to have been the truest expression in verse of the moral and intellectual tendencies of his period," had Matthew Arnold instead of Clough been his intimate friend.[2]

As on Tennyson and on Browning, so also Lowell wrote on Landor and at about the same time.[3] Again he wrote on him many years later, after having met him personally, in order to introduce a sheaf of his letters published in the *Century Magazine*. With Lowell's admiration for Emerson in mind, it is interesting to note the introductory sentence of the later study: "I was first directed to Landor's works by hearing how much store Emerson set by them."[4] Lowell came to admire Landor for himself, though not without

[1] *Works*, ii., 134.
[2] *Vide Letters*, ii., 17, for the probable answer to this question.
[3] *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* for December, 1848.
[4] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 43.

reservations. He says: "I can think of no author who has oftener brimmed my eyes with tears of admiration and sympathy." And yet the judgment of the earlier article—and Lowell had not forgotten it[1]—is by no means reversed in the later one: "We consider Landor as eminently a poet—though not in verse."

The nineteenth century itself is "a self-exploiting one"[2] and the poetry of the modern style is "highfaluting . . . since poets have got hold of a theory that imagination is common-sense turned inside out."[3] So constantly does this attitude crop out in his works that it cannot be considered the result of a moment's mood. He returns to the attack when he declares:

> A sceptic might say, I think, with some justice, that poetry in England was passing now, if it have not already passed, into one of those periods of mere art without any intense convictions to back it, which lead inevitably, and by no long gradation, to the mannered and artificial.[4]

Lowell's appreciation, rising in some instances to enthusiasm, for most of the English poets of

[1] Compare, for example: "We cannot so properly call Landor a great thinker, as a man who has great thoughts" (*Mass. Q. R.*, ii., 65) with: "One would scruple to call him a great thinker, yet surely he was a man who had great thoughts" (*Latest Literary Essays*, p. 48).

[2] *Works*, iii., 94. Cf. *Ibid.*, ii., 158; ii., 212; *English Poets*, p. 49, p. 66, p. 71. [3] *Works*, iii., 270. [4] *Ibid.*, ii., 121.

whom he wrote, and his own poetical claims, make this lack of sympathy the more apparent.

This imperfect sympathy was not limited to poetry; fiction and the drama have scant interest for him. To his mind the drama appears to have died with the last of the Elizabethans. In *Dryden* it is true he discusses the poet's plays, but he ignores Restoration drama as a whole. He tells us that Wycherly corresponded with Pope; that Congreve's "shamelessness is refreshing in that age of sham"; but there is no word about the *Plain Dealer* or the *Way of the World*. Lowell seems not to have suspected any connection between the later Elizabethans and Restoration comedy: Beaumont and Fletcher in his eyes left no heritage which found expression in the *Maiden Queen* or through Congreve, in Sheridan. In *Shakespeare*, he points out parallel passages in the English poet and the Greek dramatists, but there is no hint that Shakespearean influence survived in *Venice Preserved* or *Jane Shore*. So intently did he keep his eyes fixed upon the *Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* that the *School for Scandal* and *She Stoops to Conquer* seem not to have come within his line of vision. When he discusses the difference in motive between the ancient and modern drama it is notable that by modern he means Shakespearean.[1] His letters, so rich in references to poetic literature, are all

[1] *Works*, iii., 57.

but silent on the drama. If he ever attended the theatre when in Dresden or Paris or London one finds no mention of it, although he records going "down to Cambridge to see the *Birds* of Aristophanes."[1]

When we consider Lowell's attitude toward the novel we find in his work surprising silences. In *Rousseau and the Sentimentalists* occur references to Euripides and Ovid and Petrarch; but of Richardson (whose *Pamela* was translated into French in 1741) there is never a word. And yet: Richardson's

> influence was at once felt on the literature of the Continent; his novels as a whole or in part were translated into French, Italian, German, and Dutch. . . . The tremendous latent force which lay hidden in his emotionalism, when cut loose from moral and religious restraint, was made manifest in Rousseau.[2]

This omission, by no means owing to a lack of knowledge on Lowell's part, seems ascribable in fairness to want of interest in that literary type in which Richardson was eminent. In his address on Fielding, Lowell speaks of Homer and Æschylus, of Dante and Shakespeare, but is silent about Fielding's work as a reaction from Richardson. He tells us that Fielding's genius was incapable of "ecstasy of conception"; that in "grossness his

[1] *Letters*, ii., 274. [2] Cross, *The English Novel*, p. 41.

plays could not outdo those of Dryden"; but there is nothing beyond a brief generality about his influence on the novel. Lowell had a personal acquaintance with Thackeray, at the time of the *Fielding* (1883) twenty years in his grave, but it seems not to have entered his mind to compare him with Fielding with whom he had so much in common. In an address on *Books and Libraries* (1885) he "can conceive no healthier reading for a boy or girl either, than Scott's novels, or Cooper's, to speak only of the dead." One remembers that the authors of *Copperfield* and of *Henry Esmond* had died several years before, and wonders why *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* should receive no mention.

Lowell of course read Dickens and Thackeray. He is much pleased with *Vanity Fair;* Thackeray "has not Dickens' talents as a caricaturist but he draws with more truth."[1]

In Dickens, the lower part of "the World" is brought into the Police Court, as it were, and there, after cross-examination, discharged or committed as the case may be. The characters are real and low, but they are facts. That is one way. Thackeray's is another and better. One of his books is like a Dionysius ear, through which you hear the World talking, entirely unconscious of being overheard.[2]

[1] Scudder, i., 297.

[2] *Letters*, i., 211.

He is pleased to attend a reading by Dickens in 1868, but in 1887 "is trying to get rested by reading Dickens" whose *David Copperfield* he has never read.

Of George Eliot we look for mention in vain. *Jane Eyre* was "very pleasant" to him and he "liked *Wuthering Heights*." Having nothing to do, he tries George Meredith, behind whose "briery intricacies" he gets occasional glimpses of a "consummate flower hidden somewhere."[1] He reads "Harry James's and Howells's stories," and gives us the key to his interest in the novels of his protégé Howells by writing him: "I am as weak as Falstaff and can't help liking whatever you do, whatever it may be."[2] Howells published an article in the *North American Review* on *Recent Italian Comedy*. Lowell writes him to send in "another on *Modern Italian Literature* or anything you like," his interest being "in your genius," it is evident, and not in modern Italian literature for its own sake. In Spain he is chiefly interested in old editions of *Don Quixote* and *The Cid*.

Lowell's preference for Thackeray over Dickens may have been due to the latter's more obvious realism. He remarks that no one nowa-

[1] *Letters*, ii., 358.

[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 297. Cf. *ibid.*, ii., 17: "When my heart is warm towards anyone, I like all about him, and this is why I am so bad (or so good) a critic."

days would have the courage to paint a man as Fielding dared to do.[1] But it may be suspected that Lowell would not have read *Tom Jones* had it appeared a century after 1749. For we have Howells' word for it that Lowell "would not suffer realism in any but a friend." He could not be persuaded even to read the great Russian novelists. "Ibsen," continues Howells, "with all the Norwegians, he put far from him; he would no more know them than the Russians; the French naturalists he abhorred."[2] For the same reason he ignored the claims of Valdes, of whom he says: He was "practically impervious to the germinal ideas which . . . give the writings of Balzac et Cie. a pressing claim upon the best attention of any serious modern critic."[3] He thinks Charles de Bernard "knew the Great World far better than Balzac knew it" and has been saved by a "gentlemanly humor" from "yielding . . . to melodrama as Balzac so often did."[4] Lowell's

[1] *Works*, vi., 63.

[2] Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, p. 245. Cf. *Works*, vi., 85: "Among books . . . there is much variety of company, ranging from the best to the worst, from Plato to Zola." Cf. *Works*, vi., 60 for an attack on French realists.

[3] Greenslet, p. 292.

[4] *Letters*, ii., 429. *Vide* Saintsbury, *Essays on French Novelists*, p. 165: "Charles de Bernard cannot be called a great novelist. . . . But for the actual amusement of the time occupied in reading him, and in the character of time-killer, he may challenge comparison with almost any artist in fiction."

preference for the *Odyssey* over the *Iliad*, his fondness for Euripides and Calderon, point towards his romantic interests, interests which account to some extent for his lack of sympathy for realism. "Fielding," he says, "has the merit, *whatever it may be*, of inventing the realistic novel as it is called."[1] In poetry he found that realism which belonged to the "physically intense school," decidedly intolerable. Of this school "Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is the worst example, whose muse is a *fast* young woman . . . of the *demi-monde*."[2] He places Swinburne in this school, "the worst school of modern poetry."[3] Realism become coarseness, offended him in Swift and Pope. He confesses to a hearty dislike of Dean Swift, regrets that his "smutchy verses are not even yet excluded from the collections," and accuses him of "filthy cynicism."[4] As for Pope, "No poet could write a *Dunciad*," he said in 1844, a declaration which he repeated twenty-seven years later.

Pope he found guilty of insincerity—a weakness he could not brook. "Without earnest conviction," he declared, "no great or sound literature is conceivable." Waller, insincere and mean, supplied by his verses a constant target for Lowell, who

[1] *Works*, vi., 64. The italics are mine.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 122. Cf. *Letters*, i., 365.
[3] Cf. *Letters*, i., 377, and *Works*, ii., 122.
[4] *Letters*, i., 76; *Conversations*, p. 7; *Works*, iii., 153, and iv., 18.

conceded to him only two good lines in all his poetry.[1] Strong as was Lowell's antipathy to insincerity it was even stronger towards sentimentality. "I do abhor sentimentality from the bottom of my soul."[2] Perhaps the consciousness of a tendency to this weakness in himself, kept in check however by a sense of humor, made Lowell especially hard on the sentimentalists. Petrarch he regarded as "the first choragus of that sentimental dance which so long led young folks away from the realities of life . . . and whose succession ended, let us hope, with Chateaubriand."[3] Petrarch was an "intellectual voluptuary"; Chateaubriand was "the arch sentimentalist of these latter days," and with Lamartine is called "the mere lackey of fine phrases."[4] Rousseau "the modern founder of the sect" is a "quack of genius."[5] Moore, accused of living "in sham" and of "cloying sentimentalism," was the object of the critic's hearty dislike.[6] Percival, whom Lowell crushed in a paper which has been likened to Macaulay's *Montgomery*, was a sentimentalist, a fact which with Lowell puts his poetical mediocrity beyond all toleration. In this same essay the critic takes

[1] *Among My Books* (i.), p. 51. A slightly larger claim is allowed in *Works*, iii., 156.

[2] *Letters*, i., 205.

[3] *Works*, i., 100; Cf. *ibid.*, ii., 253.

[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 253; 160; 271.

[5] *Ibid.*, i., 376; *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 165.

[6] *Ibid.*, ii., 240, 145. Cf. *ibid.*, iv., 391 (note).

occasion to express an opinion which shows a wholesome view of genius:

> The theory that the poet is a being above the world and apart from it is true of him as an observer only who applies to the phenomena about him the test of a finer and more spiritual sense. That he is a creature divinely set apart from his fellow men by a mental organization that makes them mutually unintelligible to each other, is in flat contradiction with the lives of those poets universally acknowledged as greatest.[1]

His paper on Thoreau proves him quite out of sympathy with the author of *Walden*, under whose "surly and stoic garb," he now and then detects "something of the sophist and sentimentalizer." Why a man should be eager for the wilderness except "for a mood or a vacation," he cannot understand. He continues:

> Those who have most loudly advertised their passion for seclusion and their intimacy with nature, from Petrarch down, have been mostly sentimentalists, unreal men, misanthropes on the spindle side, solacing an uneasy suspicion of themselves by professing contempt for their kind.[2]

It was the discovery of what he considered sentimentalism which brought about a change in Lowell's opinion of the Elizabethan dramatist

[1] *Works*, ii., 156. Cf. *Letters*, i., 366.
[2] *Works*, i., 376. Cf. *ibid.*, iv., 412.

Ford. So strong was his aversion to this weakness, that in two notable instances his accusation of something close to sentimentality has the air of being introduced as a final justification of his unsympathetic attitude. He attacks Burke for attacking Rousseau and declares: "Burke was himself also, in the subtler sense of the word, a sentimentalist."[1] As to Carlyle he speaks of "his innate love of the picturesque (which is only another form of the sentimentalism he so scoffs at, perhaps as feeling it a weakness in himself)."[2] Realizing probably that this insinuation was scarcely warranted by the premise, Lowell added a footnote in 1888: "Thirty years ago, when this was written, I ventured only a hint that Carlyle was essentially a sentimentalist. In what has been published since his death I find proof of what I had divined rather than definitely formulated."[3]

Although Lowell employed a medieval setting in *Sir Launfal* and *A Legend of Brittany*, and although he used a familiar Greek theme in *Endymion*, he inveighs against this search for subjects in the medieval or classical ages. He says frankly: "I don't believe in these modern antiques—no, not in Landor, not in Swinburne, not in any of

[1] *Works*, ii., 233. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 92.

[3] Cf. *Letters*, ii., 282, and *Letters*, ii., 320; "[Carlyle's] is a fine character to my thinking, especially manly and helpful to the core."

'em. They are all wrong."[1] He complains that "Longfellow is driven to take refuge among the red men, and Tennyson in the Cambro-Breton cyclus of Arthur."[2] He reads the *Idylls*, but while he sees

> very fine childish things in Tennyson's poem and fine manly things, too, . . . I conceive the theory to be wrong. I have the same feeling (I am not wholly sure of its justice) that I have when I see these modern-mediæval pictures. I am defrauded; I do not see reality, but a masquerade.[3]

One finds Lowell's theory difficult on remembering how much that was eminent in nineteenth-century poetry, from *Laodamia* and *Isabella* and *The Cenci* down, is drawn from fountain-heads either mediæval or classic.

Lowell never pardoned dullness in a work of literature; that was the irrevocable condemnation. To be interesting, he maintained, was "the first duty of every artistic production."[4] He finds Wordsworth dull at times, though he offers "extenuating circumstances." But when dealing with early poets in whom present-day interest is not keen, he could indulge his impatience of dullness without stint. "We have Gascoigne, Surrey, Wyatt, stiff, pedantic, artificial, systematic as a

[1] *Letters*, i., 357.
[2] *Works*, ii., 132.
[3] *Letters*, ii., 85. cf. *infra*, p. 170 and note.
[4] *Works*, ii., 142.

country cemetery . . . Sternhold and Hopkins are inspired men in comparison with them."[1] But of the author of *Confessio Amantis*, he has harder things to say: "Gower has positively raised tediousness to the precision of a science . . . You slip to and fro on the frozen levels of his verse which give no foothold to the mind . . . There is nothing beyond his powers to disenchant."[2] This attitude is not unintelligible. But it is not so easy to understand how on grounds of dullness he could condemn Peele and Greene. He thanks Greene "for the word 'brightsome' and for two lines" of a song. "Otherwise he is naught."[3] Peele, he says, like Greene, "defied the inspiring influence of the air he breathed . . . But he had not that genius for being dull all the time that Greene had."[4] One cannot hesitate to believe that against dullness the stars in their courses fight in vain. Recalling, however, *Old Wives' Tale* and especially *James IV.*, one hesitates to accept the critic's condemnation on the score of dullness. A more plausible reason for his quarrel with Greene and Peele may later be apparent.

[1] *Works*, iv., 274.
[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 329 and 330.
[3] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 19.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

CHAPTER IV

THE JUDICIAL ATTITUDE WITH LOWELL

LOWELL'S sympathy with nineteenth-century literature, at least in some of its phases, would probably have been less imperfect but for qualities in himself which may be called provincialism and puritanism. Living in a cosmopolis, he would have touched elbows with men who were in the full current of their day in poetry, in drama, in the novel. *Belles-lettres* and the literature of an earlier time engaged his attention too absorbingly, and that myriad-mindedness which he could have found and to some degree did find late in life in London, was not discoverable in Cambridge or even in Boston.[1] Lowell himself was awake to the difference. He writes to Norton in 1883:

I like London, and have learned to see as I never saw before the advantage of a great capital. It establishes one set of weights and measures, moral and intellectual, for the whole country. It is, I

[1] Cf. *To O. W. H.* in *Poetical Works*, iv., 120, where Lowell says they have always found Cambridge good enough for them.

think, a great drawback for us that we have as many as we have States.[1]

Lowell has caught in his English addresses something of the cosmopolitan tone whose presence he had so quickly perceived. One cannot but notice, however, that the moderation of tone sits a bit awkwardly on his sentences:

> But what I think constitutes his (Coleridge's) great power . . . is the perpetual presence of imagination . . . It was she who gave him that power of sympathy which made his *Wallenstein* what I may call the most original translation in our language, *unless some of the late Mr. Fitzgerald's be reckoned such.*[2]

This effort to avoid superlatives, to express opinions more as opinions and less as facts beyond cavil, is conscious. But it never became deep-rooted and Lowell, home again in Massachusetts where he was free from the challenging eyes of a British audience, slipped back into broad superlative: "It is no sentimental argument for this study [Greek], that the most justly balanced, the most serene, and the most fecundating minds since the revival of learning have been steeped in and saturated with Greek literature."[3] Again: Sterne

[1] *Letters*, ii., 273.

[2] *Works*, vi., 72. The italics are mine. This address was delivered in Westminster Abbey, May 7, 1885. *Vide infra*, p. 186.

[3] *Ibid.*, vi., 166.

is "the most subtle humorist since Shakespeare,"[1] and Milton "is the most eloquent of Englishmen."[2]

But if Lowell's English experience did not leave him permanently wary of the allurements of superlative, it doubtless conspired, with the staidness which came with years, to keep him from more obvious sins of provincialism. He is thereafter fairly on his guard against those *bourgeoiseries* which jar one frequently in his work.[3] In his English addresses he slips only twice, once in an address not published till after his death,[4] once when speaking at the Workingmen's College, London.[5]

Such *bourgeoiseries* are common enough in Lowell but by no means more common than ebullitions of a humor which is delightful at times but which often becomes sophomoric. Writing at the centre, Lowell would not have said: "It almost takes one's breath away to think that *Hamlet* and the *Novum Organon* were at the risk of teething and measles at the same time."[6] Nor would he have let his provincialism carry him into sins against that taste which recognizes an instinc-

[1] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 12. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[3] In *Dante* (1872) Lowell is careful to avoid these lapses. But in *Spenser* (1875) he returns to them again, though by no means with his old-time frequency.

[4] On *Richard III.*, delivered before the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution, published in *Latest Literary Essays*.

[5] *Works*, vi., 131.

[6] *Works*, iii., 16. Cf. also *ibid.*, i., 271; *ibid.*, iv., 38.

tive propriety not only of subject but of treatment. Writing at the centre, he would hardly have said: "During his (Petrarch's) retreat at Vaucluse, in the very height of that divine sonneteering love of Laura, of that sensitive purity which called Avignon Babylon . . . he was himself begetting that kind of children which we spell with a *b*."[1] This particular weakness of Lowell's led him astray more than once. The finer propriety which he would have acquired if writing at the centre would have kept him from more notable faults against taste. He would not have devoted twenty-one out of fifty-nine pages to an attack upon the weak points of an editor so vulnerable as Mr. Masson. He would have found a different text for a preachment on modern-day sentimentalism than the disappointed life and mediocre verse of a man already eleven years in his grave.[2] He would not have so completely lost his temper as he did in *Library of Old Authors*. "The old maidenly genius of antiquarianism seems to have presided over the editing of the Library," he exclaims. Towards the chief editor of the Library, he betrays a special animus: "It might . . . be

[1] *Works*, ii., 255. Cf. also *ibid.*, iii., 284; *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 9, etc. The classic case of Lowell's weakness for punning and bad taste occurs in *Fireside Travels*, p. 189, regarding the cataract and Milton. It is omitted from the final edition of Lowell's works.

[2] Percival died in 1856; his poems were published in 1859; Lowell's article appeared in 1867 in *North American Review*.

as easy to perform the miracle on the blind man as on Mr. Hazlitt."[1] One recalls the slashing style of the old reviewers, happily extinct with an earlier generation, in place of which came such a method as that of Arnold in Lowell's own day, which lost none of its force by preserving all of its urbanity. But Arnold was not provincial.

Provincialism, it is safe to say, tended to strengthen Lowell's puritanism, which was too deeply grounded to be affected by his years in Madrid and London. All his life he clung to two ideas; they were, as will be evident, not always maintained in his criticism and were at times even contradicted. But that they were deeply ingrained in his mind and were never really abandoned is beyond all question. They intruded upon his literary estimates in a confusing way and placed him in the quandary of being forced either to abandon or essentially to modify his belief on the one hand or to shut his eyes to genuine worth on the other. The first of these ideas concerns poetry; the sec-

[1] It has been said in Lowell's defense (Greenslet, p. 166) that his resentment towards England's pro-Southern attitude in the Civil War was partly the cause of the "peculiar animus" so evident in this essay. "The component single reviews of which this article is made up had appeared," says Mr. Greenslet, "in the *Atlantic* and *North American* in war-time." This is not quite accurate. The first review appeared in the *Atlantic* in April, the second in May, the third in June, all in 1858; the fifth in the *North American* for July, 1864; the sixth in the same review for April, 1870; the fourth I have not been able to trace.

ond, character. As early as the *Boston Miscellany* days, Lowell believed in the sacredness of poetry and of the poetic calling. In *Conversations* he wrote: "Poetry is something to make us wiser and better, by continually revealing those types of beauty and truth which God has set in all men's souls." Eleven years later he held to the same conception in his lectures before the Lowell Institute. The poet has a mission, to which he may be false, or of which he may be unconscious. "The sacred duty and noble office of the poet is to reveal and justify . . . [grace and goodness, the fair, the noble, and the true] to men."[1] He does not leave beauty out of the reckoning: "No verse, the chief end of which is not the representation of the beautiful, and whose moral is not included in that, can be called poetry in the true sense of the word."[2] He reaffirms this notion twenty years later in *Spenser*, though in *Wordsworth* he has declared that the poet will win our maturer gratitude who makes us less concerned with poetry as beauty than with poetry as a criticism of life.[3] From these opinions of Lowell his conception of poetry is manifest: Poetry is the expression of beauty, but that beauty must be the medium for such ideas as make truth and nobility dearer to men. It is the presence of the moral element in the definition which leads to the consideration of the poet as a

[1] *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 209.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 28. [3] Lowell's *Works*, iv., 413.

man. Something of a religious character, says Lowell, clings to the poet. "It is something to be thought of, that all the great poets have been good men."[1] The implication is inevitable and was formulated by Strabo in ancient days and by men as unlike as Shelley and Newman in our own time: no man can be a great poet who is not first a good man. Should Lowell cleave to such a definition of poetry, with its emphasis on the moral element, and demand goodness on the part of the poet, he is certain to meet with difficulties. Men like Goethe, Byron, Shelley, and Burns will cause him more or less trouble.[2] In the case of most of the poets of whom he treated, a reconciliation of poetic gifts and character was not difficult; in no case was it impossible.

Accepting the great classics without question as Lowell the conservative did, he was bound to reconcile his theory of the poet with the poet's work: if the work was noble so too must be the poet. He does not disguise his eagerness to bring them into harmony. His attitude towards a supposed phase of Chaucer's life, long current and by no means savory, is typical:

[1] *English Poets*, p. 203. Cf. *Works*, iv., 357, 48, 297.

[2] In the introduction which he wrote to Shelley's poems (1857) Lowell says, speaking of Shelley's treatment of his first wife: "A matter of morals, as between man and society, cannot be reduced to any individual standard however exalted." As to Byron, cf. Lowell's *Works*, ii., 238; as to Goethe, *vide ibid.*, ii., 194.

Our chief debt to Sir Harris Nicholas is for having disproved the story that Chaucer, imprisoned for complicity in the insurrection of John of Northampton, had set himself free by betraying his accomplices. That a poet, one of whose leading qualities is his good sense and moderation, and who should seem to have practiced his own rule, to

> "Fly from the press and dwell with soothfastness;
> Suffice thee thy good though it be small,"

should have been concerned in any such 'political excesses, was improbable enough; but that he should add to this the baseness of broken faith was incredible.[1]

When he comes to speak of Dante, Lowell confronts a phase of the poet's life the truth of which has met wide acceptance. Taking up the charge that, following Beatrice's death, Dante gave himself up to sensual gratification, Lowell says: "Let us dismiss at once and forever all the idle tales of Dante's amours."[2] Boccaccio, he declares, "first set this nonsense agoing" and made such an accusation because "it gave him a chance to turn a period."[3] There are dangers in arguing back from an assumed conclusion.

[1] *Works*, iii., 295. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 190.

[3] *Ibid.*, iv., 190 and 191 (notes). "Nobody who never had felt the like himself could have painted the sinful love of Francesca and Paolo so touchingly . . . as Dante has done in the fifth canto of Hell." Federn, p. 221. After Beatrice's death, "we know that Dante for a time led a rather dissolute life." *Ibid.*, p. 235.

This eagerness to bring a poet's character into accord with the critic's ideal of what it should be sometimes forces Lowell into open contradiction with his own opinion. Dryden, who is a favorite of his, was guilty of writing indecent comedies. But, says Lowell, "I do not believe that he was conscious of any harm in them till he was attacked by Collier."[1] A little later however, in the same essay, the licentiousness of Dryden's comedies is brought home to his recollection by the fact that "*Limerham* was barely tolerated for three nights." He then declares: "Dryden's own apology only makes matters worse for him by showing that he committed his offenses with his eyes wide open."[2] Regarding the character of Shakespeare, Lowell expresses an opinion in accord with his ideal of the poet, though his conception finds neither confirmation nor denial in the facts as we know them. "Higher even than the genius I rate the character of this unique man and the grand impersonality of what he wrote."[3] The second clause is rather vague; Lowell explains: Shakespeare has the poise and self-command, the serenity and loftiness which are so rare "in our self-exploiting nineteenth century."

Lowell's conception of the importance of character in its connection with poetic genius approaches nearly to puritanism in his inclination to believe that great character is a noble form of

[1] *Works*, iii., 149. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 152. [3] *Ibid.*, iii., 94.

genius. He goes even further: character, he asserts, is "the only soil in which real mental power can root itself and find sustenance."[1] Difficulties lie ahead if Lowell cleave to this belief. He recognizes the difficulty himself: it will not be surprising to find him endeavoring to soften down the acerbity of Pope, and in the face of contradictions attributing sincerity to the lachrymose feverishness of Rousseau, just in proportion as he is eager to account for the position of the one and to justify the fame and influence of the other.

In his study of the great poets, Lowell decided not only that "all the great poets have been good men," but that "they were men of their generation who felt most deeply the meaning of the present."[2] This last idea, to which he himself as a poet did not always cleave, explains his failure to sympathize with much that is beautiful and probably enduring in nineteenth-century poetry. For, as has been already pointed out, Lowell disbelieved in Greek and medieval themes, thus making an application, provincial in its narrowness, of a belief to which one might well hesitate to take exception.

It is not easy to say where in this general attitude puritanism ends and provincialism begins. It is not easy to say how far this attitude would have been modified, if Lowell had all his life been writing at the centre. Possibly there would have

[1] *Works*, ii., 195. [2] *English Poets*, 210.

been no modification at all. It has already been pointed out that various lapses against good taste, some slight, some grave, would not be chargeable to Lowell had he always been a cosmopolitan. Under such a fortunate condition he would probably have felt more interest in the novel and the drama and a less imperfect sympathy for nineteenth-century poetry. But his dislike of realism in the novel and of classic and medieval elements in modern poetry, while it might have been softened by cosmopolitan influences, was probably too deeply rooted in his puritanism to be wholly eradicated. In his English address on Fielding he is not unsympathetic, though Fielding is a realist and the inventor of the realistic novel. Lowell's prejudice in this instance is kept out of sight: after all he is discussing a man whose "works are become a substantial part of . . . English literature." And yet his sense of moral evaluation will not down: a third of the address is given up to a consideration and defense of the morality of Fielding and his works. The significance of this lies not so much in the fact that Lowell played the rôle of apologist as that he considers such a rôle as necessary. It is obvious that this bent of mind which has been called puritanism was too deeply embedded in Lowell's fibre; it played a part even in those essays where we have not already marked its presence.

However defective Lowell's sympathies were in

certain directions, he honestly tried to maintain detachment—to preserve the judicial attitude—towards the subject of the essay and his works. As proof of this the essay on Rousseau is worth examination. In *obiter dicta* the critic declares Rousseau a sentimentalist, "the victim of a fine phrase," and—here is his real attitude in a word—"a quack of genius." But when he comes to discuss Rousseau formally, he is determined to maintain a judicial attitude. His lack of sympathy must not appear: after all, the object of his consideration is a French classic, whose influence in awakening an appreciation of nature, and in the fields of political thought and of education, has been great. Lowell first considers Burke, who bitterly attacked Rousseau; then Johnson, who "would sooner sign a sentence for his (Rousseau's) transportation, than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years"; and finally Tom Moore, who poured out "several pages of octosyllabic disgust at the sensuality of the dead man of genius."[1] Lowell attempts to invalidate these attacks by attacking the men who made them. Burke was vain, a sentimentalist, and a snob.[2] Johnson was a hard-headed, illogical conservative, and a friend of "that gay man about town, Topham Beauclerk" and of "that wretchedest of lewd fellows, Richard Savage."[3] Moore

[1] *Works*, ii., 235 ff. *passim*.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 233, 236.
[3] *Ibid.*, ii., 236.

was a sentimentalist, a toady, and a sham.[1] Rousseau, continues Lowell, had genius, and the attacks upon his character might well have been omitted: "Genius is not a question of character."[2] Indeed, as to the man of genius, "Whatever he was or did, somehow or other God let him be worthy to write *this*, and that is enough for us."[3] But after all, Lowell cannot quite forget that Rousseau is "a quack of genius" and a sentimentalist who sent his children to the foundling hospital. He cannot ignore his character. He retreats: "The moment he (the sentimentalist) undertakes to establish his feeling as a rule of conduct, we ask at once how far are his own life and deed in accordance with what he preaches."[4] After all, how fine a thing is a lovely action![4] He soon returns to Moore and remembering that he has branded him as a sham and a toady for daring to call genius an impostor, declares: "The confusion of his (Moore's) ideas is pitiable. . . . [Genius] is always truer than the man himself is, greater than he."[5] He illustrates: "If Shakespeare the man had been as marvellous a teacher as the genius that wrote his plays . . . would his contemporaries have left us so wholly without record of him as they have done?"[5] One feels that Lowell's eagerness to do justice to Rousseau has led him far afield. He retreats again, not to any further abstract dis-

[1] *Works*, ii., 238 ff. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 241. [3] *Ibid.*, ii., 241.
[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 243. [5] *Ibid.*, ii., 244.

cussion, but to a consideration of Rousseau's character. Though weak and sometimes despicable, he "is not fairly to be reckoned among the herd of sentimentalists."[1] Moreover, "In judging Rousseau it would be unfair not to take note of the malarious atmosphere in which he grew up."[2] In a consideration of sentimentalism and of prominent sentimentalists in literature, Lowell feels, it is easy to see, a revulsion from the unreality of their work. He forgets that "genius is not a question of character"; now he says: Except in the case of the highest creative genius "the author is inevitably mixed with his work, and we have a feeling that the amount of his sterling character is the security for the notes he issues."[3] This exception marks a return towards Lowell's real belief in the inter-relation of genius and character. Again he comes to Rousseau: he was the "most perfect type of the sentimentalist of genius."[4] In fact his was "the brain most far reaching in speculation that ever kept itself steady . . . amid such disordered tumult of the nerves."[4] And yet one cannot read his *Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques* without believing him insane.[5] The contradiction here Lowell does not notice: his point in one sentence is to praise Rousseau for his mental power and in the next to suggest a reason

[1] *Works*, ii., 244.

[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 247. *Vide Lippincott's*, vii., 645 ff., on Lowell's misconception in this matter.

[3] *Ibid.*, ii., 257. [4] *Ibid.*, ii., 262. [5] *Ibid.*, ii., 263.

for a "charitable . . . notion of him." Lowell continues: Rousseau had a remarkable vein of common sense, although his political system was based on a fallacy. "For good or evil," Rousseau "was the foster-father of modern democracy."[1] As a man he "might have been a saint" or "have founded an order," although a little later Lowell from his *Confessions* would "assign him to that class with whom the religious sentiment is strong and the moral nature weak."[2] Let us pity, he pleads, not condemn. We ought not to ask, What kind of life did Rousseau lead, but rather, "Was this the life he meant to lead?"[3] Lowell knows the answer he would make to all this. He made it nineteen years later when he called Rousseau "a quack of genius." But now Rousseau is the subject of his essay; he is bound to treat him with judicial impartiality. He answers:

Perhaps, when we take into account his faculty of self-deception . . . we should ask, Was this the life he believed he led?[4] Have we any right to judge this man after our blunt English fashion, and condemn him, as we are wont to do, on the finding of a jury of average householders? Is French reality precisely our reality? Could we tolerate tragedy in rhymed alexandrines, instead of blank verse?[3]

[1] *Works*, ii., 264. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 265. [3] *Ibid.*, ii., 268.

[4] Cf. Introduction to Shelley's *Poems*, p. 21: "A question of morals as between man and society cannot be reduced to any individual standard however exalted."

Rousseau was a typical Frenchman, in many respects, and too often "fell in with the fashion" of "truth padded out to the size and shape demanded by *comme-il-faut*."[1] Rousseau was "intellectually . . . true and fearless; constitutionally, timid, contradictory, and weak; but never, if I understand him rightly, false."[2] The final conclusion is really the keynote to Lowell's true position; stripped of metaphor it means: Rousseau belonged to the sentimentalists, but there were excellent elements in him notwithstanding and less taint than is usual with the class.[3] One cannot but feel that Lowell has tried hard to treat Rousseau with justice although his endeavors led him into strange vagaries. He attacks Burke and Johnson, both of whom he admires; hopelessly upsets his deep-rooted notion of genius and character; involves himself in a contradiction regarding Rousseau's sanity; employs false logic; and sins against historical accuracy. The price was rather a heavy one to pay: it at least proves that Lowell was eager to be fair.

In his essay on Pope, Lowell recalls his earlier dislike of the poet, and though his sympathy is imperfect he protests that he is "at least in a condition to allow him every merit that is fairly his." In 1886, Lowell expressed what a study of the *Pope* persuades one was his real opinion: Pope's "vivid genius almost persuaded wit to

[1] *Works*, ii., 269. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 270. [3] *Ibid.*, ii., 270 ff.

renounce its proper nature and become poetry." This was also his opinion in *Conversations*. In the essay on Pope, he declares that the poet "fills a very important place in the history of English poetry." The final point of the essay is embodied in this question: Was Pope really a poet? Lowell's own belief is evident. But he is talking of a classic of English literature and feels bound to do him justice: his judicial findings must not be radical on the one hand, nor unfair on the other. He avoids an unequivocal answer; he implies that Pope is not a poet since "in any strict definition there can be only one kind of poetry."[1] But "it should seem that the abiding presence of fancy in his best work forbids his exclusion from the rank of poet."[2] This idea grows on him until he assumes the very point under discussion in his declaration: "The *Rape of the Lock* sets him even as a poet far above many men more largely endowed with poetic feeling and insight than he."[3] All things considered, one feels that Lowell has held in check his lack of sympathy and tried to maintain a judicial attitude. As for Pope as a man he says: "In spite of the savageness of his satires, his natural disposition seems to have been an amiable one . . . There was very little real malice in him"; and "'his evil was wrought from want of thought.'"[4] Lowell believes him a *poseur* in his letters, thinks

[1] *Works*, iv., 53.
[2] *Ibid.*, iv., 56.
[3] *Ibid.*, iv., 57.
[4] *Ibid.*, iv., 49 ff.

his attack on Theobald due to jealousy, and says he made a "brutal assault" on Denis in order to "propitiate a man whose critical judgment he dreaded."[1] But the critic would be just and finds palliation in the influence of the age and of Swift.

If it is necessary to examine Lowell's attempt to maintain a judicial attitude towards men like Rousseau and Pope, with both of whom he was out of sympathy, it is no less important to examine him from the same point of view in his essay on Carlyle, towards whom he felt "a secret partiality."[2]

If he tries to transcend his sympathy and become judicial and coldly considerate, he fails and becomes "perhaps . . . harder on him than I meant."[2] Carlyle, he finds, is the "first in insight of English critics and the most vivid of English historians."[3] He has a "conceptive imagination vigorous beyond any in his generation," a "mastery of language equalled only by the greatest poets."[4] But he has many defects which we have a right to inquire into "when he assumes to be a teacher of moral or political philosophy."[4] Carlyle would force his ideas upon us by repeating them "with increasing emphasis and heightened shrillness,"[5] until they have at last become cant,[6] and he has grown to be insincere

[1] *Works*, iv., 52. [2] *Letters*, ii., 74. [3] *Works*, ii., 86.
[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 90. [5] *Ibid.*, ii., 96. [6] *Ibid.*, ii., 97.

and "something very like a sham himself."[1] Caryle's conception of history moreover is wrong: it is not primarily concerned with heroic or typical figures.[2] The *Frederick* he finds is an exaltation of a man far below the heroic standard.[3] It is a work which (and this is significant) "is open to all manner of criticism, especially in point of moral purpose and tendency."[4] Lowell approaches the end of the essay; perhaps he has gone too far in his adverse criticism. He says: "With all deductions, he remains the profoundest critic and the most dramatic imagination of modern times."[4] He belongs to the highest order of minds, for he is an inspirer and awakener.[5] The next sentence is noteworthy, for Lowell is thinking of his own obligations: "The debt due him from those who listened to the teachings of his prime for revealing to them what sublime reserves of power even the humblest may find in manliness, sincerity, and self-reliance, can be paid with nothing short of reverential gratitude."[5] There lies the secret of Lowell's partiality. Perhaps he has experienced a reaction from the admiration of the early days; his tone in the essay is of one who has outgrown his author. In considering Carlyle, it is to be remem-

[1] *Works.*, ii., 108.

[2] Cf. Lowell's utterance in 1885 (*Works*, vi., 91): "History is, indeed, mainly the biography of a few imperial men."

[3] *Works*, ii., 110.

[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 117.

[5] *Ibid.*, ii., 118.

bered, Lowell had not the steadying influence of that body of opinion which grows up through the years around a classic. These various reasons may be considered to have given Lowell through most of the essay an unsympathetic point of view. Beyond doubt his "secret partiality" explains the upsetting of his judicial attitude at the outset. In his eagerness to rise superior to that partiality, the critic assumed an attitude which carried him too far the other way.

In *Thoreau* Lowell was treating not a classic author for whom he felt imperfect sympathy as in the case of Pope, nor one whose whole class he held in aversion as in the case of Rousseau, nor yet a contemporary like Carlyle for whom he had a secret partiality. In *Thoreau* rather he was discussing an author who, as a contemporary, had not the claim upon him which as a classic he would have exercised and who had never seemed to him more than a conscious and weak imitator of Emerson. "He seems to me to have been a man with so high a conceit of himself that he accepted without questioning, and insisted on our accepting, his defects and weaknesses of character as virtues and powers peculiar to himself."[1] His indolence, lack of persistency, poverty, selfishness—all made him regard their opposites as not worth possessing.[1] Thoreau, he held, lacked continuity of mind, humor, and logical power. He was an egotist,

[1] *Works*, i., 369.

something of a sophist and sentimentalizer and lacked a "healthy mind."[1] "His aim was a noble and a useful one in the direction of 'plain living and high thinking,'" but his endeavors at carrying it out were unsound.[2] His thought and style furthermore were misty and not mystic.[3] Towards the end of the essay the pendulum swings back; the critic seems warm for man and author as before he was warm against them. "We have," he says, "the highest testimony to the natural sweetness, sincerity, and nobleness of his temper."[4] He concedes that though narrow in range, Thoreau was yet a master. The critic seems to be trying honestly, however tardily, to give us the materials for striking a balance of justice.

In treating the established classics of language Lowell points out those beauties of their work which all have united in praising. In the lesser classics he will find less to praise, and here and there something to blame. But the demands on his detachment, on his power to maintain a judicial attitude, will be less than in the case of a man whose tribe is his aversion and much less than in the case of a contemporary for whom he feels such a partiality as in his conservative eyes would be quite safe only in the case of a classic.

Shakespeare to Lowell is the greatest of poets. He is "extraordinary from whatever side we look

[1] *Works*, i., 373 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, i., 380.
[3] *Ibid.*, i., 371.
[4] *Ibid.*, i., 378.

at him."[1] Wherever one turns in Lowell's works one encounters the name of Shakespeare. The critic's attitude toward the greatest of the Elizabethans was evident as early as 1842 when he wrote: "Of the old dramatists . . . only Shakespeare united perfectness of parts with adaptation and harmony of the whole."[2] In *Conversations* Shakespeare appears frequently, his practice being taken as the ultimate criterion of perfection. As the years passed, Lowell's earlier judgment became even stronger in his mind, was elaborated and phrased in sweeping superlatives. No matter what writer is under discussion, Shakespeare is brought in for a triumphant comparison. Carlyle is great, we are told, in the delineation of character, but "we doubt whether he could have conceived" a certain scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*[3]; Pope's *Rape of the Lock* shows fancy, but compare it with *Midsummer Night's Dream* and see how far it falls short of *poetic* fancy[4]; Chaucer has a vivid imaginative faculty, but see how vastly superior is that of Shakespeare.[5] One wonders if Shakespeare is an obsession with Lowell. When he comes to devote an essay to the poet, one is prepared for the attitude he will assume. If Shakespeare abandons play writing and returns to Stratford, is it because he has made a comfortable

[1] *Works*, iii., 61.
[2] *Boston Miscellany*, August, 1842, article "John Ford."
[3] *Works*, ii., 103. [4] *Ibid.*, iv., 36. [5] *Ibid.*, iii., 354.

fortune and can satisfy his ambition to live in rural quiet with a patent of gentleman? No; it is because he has fathomed human life and "come at last to the belief that genius and its works were as phantasmagoric as the rest, and that fame was as idle as the rumor of the pit."[1] If parts of his text are obscure does it suggest inadequacy or carelessness on the part of the poet? No; it

> may be attributed either to an idiosyncratic use of words and condensation of phrase, to a depth of intuition for a proper coalescence with which ordinary language is inadequate, to a concentration of passion in a focus that consumes the lighter links which bind together the clauses of a sentence or of a process of reasoning in common parlance, or to a sense of music which mingles music and meaning without essentially confounding them.[1]

This is the attitude, not of judicial calm, but of special pleading. The following sentence illustrates without need of further citation Lowell's assumption of perfection in Shakespeare: "Voltaire complains that he (Hamlet) goes mad without any sufficient object or result. Perfectly true, and precisely what was most natural for him to do, and, accordingly, precisely what Shakespeare meant that he should do."[2] Lowell's findings can be anticipated: in imagination, fancy, perspicacity, artistic discretion, judgment, poise of character,

[1] *Works*, iii., 27. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 86.

poetic instinct, humor and satire, he is so wonderful and unparalleled that even an atheist must believe his brain the creation of a Deity.[1] Lowell does not forget that the great poet must be a good man: high as he rates Shakespeare's genius he rates his character even higher. To all this there can be but one conclusion: here Lowell is not a judge; he is a panegyrist.

Dante, for whom Lowell's admiration was second only to that for Shakespeare, receives almost the same treatment. The critic's attitude is not so frankly that of rapt devotion. Dante's work had faults: "There are no doubt in the *Divina Commedia* (regarded merely as poetry) sandy spaces enough both of physics and metaphysics."[2] That is the single adverse criticism in the essay and Lowell adds, "But with every deduction Dante remains the first of descriptive as well as moral poets."[2] For the rest, he is the supreme figure in literary history, whose readers turn students, his students zealots, and what was a taste becomes a religion.[3] That sentence is significant: it is not the expression of a critic who will maintain the judicial attitude, but of one who is himself "a student turned zealot." In vividness, he regards Dante as without a rival; in straightforward pathos, the single and sufficient thrust of praise, he has no competitor; he is "the highest spiritual nature that has expressed itself in rhyth-

[1] *Works*, iii., 92 ff. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 259. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 163.

mical form."[1] One does not necessarily take issue with these judgments. But they are arrived at either by ignoring or brushing aside the case of the *advocatus diaboli* and it is obvious from the outset that the judge has determined on canonization. As a great poet, Dante must be a good man. The critic will have no flaw in him; charges of sensuality are to be "dismissed at once." Does Dante pity Francesca? It is not out of friendship for her family or from consciousness of fleshly weakness in himself, but from the tenderness of his nature.[2] Does he betray vindictiveness? It is merely righteous anger against base men.[3]

In *Chaucer*, as in *Dante*, Lowell's manner and attitude are much the same. There is no investigation of the poet's qualities; he is frankly a favorite with the critic, and the essay, so far as it deals with Chaucer, declares him, "One of the world's three or four great story tellers, . . . one of the best versifiers that ever made English trip and sing"; "one of the most purely original of poets."[4] The few external stains on the man are nothing; his character we may suppose genial, hearty, and good.[5]

As Lowell moves away from this triumvirate and comes to consider Spenser, Milton, and the rest, he succeeds in detaching himself to some extent from that superlative sympathy which in

[1] *Works*, iv., 263. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 171. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 177 ff.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 336 and 360. [5] *Ibid*, iii., 365.

the earlier cases became enthusiasm. His attitude toward Spenser is sympathetic enough but not lacking in judical coolness. Much in Spenser he says is evanescent, and the allegory of the *Faery Queen* is tiresome. The praise is not overdone, though it is generous as befits the "poet's poet." That Milton was the *doctrinaire* who was "more rhetorician than thinker" and who had a "haughty conception of himself," Lowell admits, though the inadequate nature of the essay lets him do no more than suggest the poet's greatness. Towards the other classics that have not been already discussed, Lowell's attitude was for him judicial. Towards Wordsworth perhaps his sympathy may be open to question, although in his essay on the poet he does him justice.[1] One might go on taking up in turn every essay which Lowell wrote. But the point of our examination can be made from those we have already discussed.

Towards the subject of his essay the critic is most likely to transcend judicial calm. In *Dante* he finds the Italian poet the supreme of literary figures; in *Shakespeare* he concedes that place by implication to the English poet. In the same essay he declares that no one can imitate Shakespeare "by even so much as the gait of a single verse"; in a subsequent essay he admits that this is not only possible but that it actually occurs.[2]

[1] Cf. *Works*, iv., 406; ii., 78; i., 128.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 36; *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 120.

Again in *Shakespeare*, he expresses admiration for the poet whose "poise of character . . . enabled him to be the greatest of poets and so unnoticeable a good citizen as to leave no incidents for biographies." Yet in another essay he demands: "If Shakespeare the man had been as marvellous a creature as the genius that wrote his plays, . . . would his contemporaries have left" him undistinguished and unrecorded?[1] In *Chaucer* he is eager to show from what mediocre antecedents the poet sprang with his "gracious worldliness." What are the *Chansons de Geste* after all, he would ask. "Who after reading them—even . . . the *Song of Roland*—can remember much more than a cloud of battle-dust, through which the paladins loom dimly gigantic, and a strong verse flashes here and there like an angry sword?"[2] But later, when he is not interested in exalting Chaucer, he says: "The *Chanson de Roland* is to me a very interesting and inspiring poem, certainly not to be named with the *Iliad* for purely literary charm, but equipped with the same moral qualities that have made that poem dearer to mankind than any other."[3] This tendency to ignore the demands of critical detachment in favor of the author under discussion, is the rule rather than the exception. In *Dryden*, Lowell declares the poet "highest in the second class of poets," although he regards both Milton

[1] *Works*, ii., 244.
[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 310.
[3] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 147.

and Spenser as poets of the second class and Dryden's superiors. In *Pope*, as has been pointed out, Lowell refrains from expressing his opinion that the author of the *Rape of the Lock* was not a poet, although that was his real belief. Discussing Pope as a man, he believes him guilty of "very little real malice"[1]; in another essay (that on Dryden) he says: "Pope seems to have nursed his grudge, and then, watching his chance, to have squirted vitriol from behind a corner, rather glad than otherwise if it fell on the women of those he hated or envied."[2]

This partiality for the author under discussion probably seemed to Lowell only a phase of that sympathy which the critic should feel towards his subject.[3] But it was intrusive with Lowell and too often gave him the air of a special pleader. His judgments, in consequence, are confusing, if, as often happens, they are delivered in favor of the subject of the essay in the ardor of to-day and against him in *obiter dicta* in the calm of to-morrow.

Lowell seems honestly to have desired detachment in treating the subjects of his critical essays. The very extravagances into which he fell in *Rousseau;* the repression of his own opinion of Pope as poet; his fear of being affected by his partiality for Carlyle; even his *apologia* of the

[1] *Works*, iv., 49, Essay on Pope. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 177.

[3] "Without sympathy there can be no right understanding," said Lowell. (Article on Swift, *Nation*, April 13, 1876.)

eighteenth century in *Gray*, all go to prove that whether he were treating a classic or a contemporary, either as man or as writer, or whether he were sketching a period, he was eager to be fair.

All things considered, his attitude can hardly be called judicial, except perhaps in the Lowellian sense. In Lowell's case "judicial attitude" has a meaning of its own. As one finds it in Sainte-Beuve, it means a cool aloofness which sets the facts before the reader quite uncolored by the prejudice, enthusiasm, or even by the opinion of the critic. There is no marshaling of shortcomings on the heels of excellences, each set being labeled by the critic. Of Sainte-Beuve indeed one is almost unconscious; it is his business to see that the facts are placed before you; you are the jury, not he. Yet it is he who admits this set of facts or rules out that; he does not harangue about the irrelevant, he excludes it. And so far in the background does Sainte-Beuve remain all this time that one forgets the power of his function. He knows perfectly well what the reader's conclusions will be and yet they have all the appearance of being arrived at in entire independence of the critic. But with Lowell, judicial attitude means something entirely different. He is always in the foreground, pointing out that the author under discussion has this excellence and that shortcoming. Sometimes he gives grounds for his judgments; just as often he does not. In either

case the judgment is given not with the dispassion of a judge, but with the finality of an autocrat. At times he descends from the critical bench and argues in behalf of the author under consideration with all the warmth of a special pleader. Such detachment as Sainte-Beuve's we never find. Lowell's final conclusions have the air of being reached by an intuitive process, the resultant of which, however it may exceed his grounds of judgment, the reader is to accept as the utterance of an ultimate tribunal. Lowell does not mean to be unjust. For the most part he is not. But the justice of his final conclusions does not depend on his maintenance of a judicial attitude. So far as the judicial attitude is apparent in Lowell, it is for the most part an endeavor to arrive at justice by striking an average between praise on the one hand and blame on the other.

CHAPTER V

PENETRATION: THE ULTIMATE GIFT

LOWELL in his best studies likes to call attention to the various single qualities of his author, merely mentioning some, expanding on others, but in the end suggesting the varied round of excellences and shortcomings. When one finishes his best essays, one has touched upon the works of the authors under discussion from several points of view. Whatever careful study would disclose to the eyes of a man of cultivation and taste, Lowell sees. His own appreciation of the beauties he points out becomes now and then a delight which seems to revel in a translation of its own impressions into poetic prose. Now he translates his impression of a single quality, as where he says of Milton's descriptions: In them "he seems to circle like an eagle bathing in the blue stream of air, controlling with his eye broad sweeps of champaign or of sea, and rarely fulminating in the sudden swoop of intenser expression."[1] Now he translates his impressions of a work, as of

[1] *Works*, iv., 99.

Chaucer's best tales or of the best passages in Wordsworth, and his translations are always beautiful. What could be finer than this on Spenser's poetry?

> Other poets have held their mirrors up to nature, . . . but Spenser's is a magic glass in which we see . . . visionary shapes conjured up by the wizard's art from some confusedly remembered past or some impossible future; it is like one of those still pools of medieval legend which covers some sunken city of the antique world; a reservoir in which all our dreams seem to have been gathered. As we float upon it, we see that it pictures faithfully enough the summer-clouds that drift over it, the trees that grow about its margin, but in the midst of these shadowy echoes of actuality we catch faint tones of bells that seem blown to us from beyond the horizon of time, and, looking down into the clear depths, catch glimpses of towers and far-shining knights and peerless dames that waver and are gone. Is it a world that ever was, or shall be, or can be, or but a delusion?[1]

One feels that such a passage as this, or as the analogy between the *Divina Commedia* and a Gothic cathedral, belongs to poetry.[2] Such translations of impression were not inadvertent. Said Lowell in 1855: "A lecturer on science has only to show how much he knows—the lecturer on poetry can only be sure how much he *feels*."[3] This

[1] *Works*, iv., 348. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 236.
[3] *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 3.

tendency for translating feeling into figurative language was, as has been already pointed out, one of the chief characteristics of Lowell's criticism all his life. In 1842 he speaks of Chapman, "whose rustling vines and calm snow-capt head, which seems made to slumber in the peaceful blue, are on the sudden deluged with surging lava from the burning heart below."[1] Even as a critic, Lowell the boy was emphatically father of Lowell the man. It is in such interpretative criticism as this that he is at his best. He seems to find abstract questions penitential to discuss, but once he is free to tap the wellsprings of his feelings, he is at ease.

That this should be the case is not surprising. Lowell had taste and imagination; both gifts helped to make his impressions true and his translation of them poetical in conception and phrasing. At times his interpretations are not drawn out but condensed, and gain from their brevity and suggestiveness something of epigrammatic point. Chapman's eloquence, "nobly fine" and "robustious," at times "seems to be shouted through a speaking-trumpet in a gale of wind."[2] His essay on Pope is summed up with a striking antithesis: "Measured by any high standard of imagination, he will be found wanting; tried by any standard of wit, he is unrivaled." The grace of inspiration

[1] *Early Writings*, p. 188. (*Boston Miscellany*, 1842.)
[2] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 90.

was with him when he wrote of Thoreau: "As we read him, it seems as if all-out-of-doors had kept a diary and become its own Montaigne."[1] It would be difficult to find in a volume of appreciation two lines more happily suggestive.

This felicity of phrase is not uncommon in Lowell and flashes out when most unexpected. He declines to discuss the originality of Keats, for originality is not definable; we all have intellectual ancestors: "In the parliament of the present every man represents a constituency of the past."[2] The things of the spirit survive the wealth of nations; who could have put the thought more beautifully? "The garners of Sicily are empty now, but the bees from all climes still fetch honey from the tiny garden-plot of Theocritus."[3] Much of the same idea again is in Lowell's mind, the deathlessness of those pages touched by "the authentic soul of man," when he said: "Oblivion looks in the face of the Grecian Muse only to forget her errand."[4] It is small wonder that the man who could achieve so many phrases, felicitous, illumined with fancy, quotable, should himself escape criticism by disarming the *advocatus diaboli.*

Though Lowell, it will be remembered, sometimes fell short in the kind of taste which observes the proprieties in the treatment of persons and in the expression of thought, he was rarely at

[1] *Works*, i., 381.
[2] *Ibid*, i., 241.
[3] *Ibid.*, vi., 174.
[4] *Ibid.*, vi., 165.

fault in that kind of taste which never mistakes poor verse or prose for good. His papers on the Elizabethan dramatists, published in the *Boston Miscellany* in 1842, are little more than collections of excerpts from the dramatists considered; in no case does the selection fail to justify the taste of the critic. In *Conversations* and again in *Old English Dramatists*, in both of which the excerpts are numerous, the case is the same. In several instances indeed, the Lowell of 1887 showed approval of his earlier judgment, by quoting passages which he had cited forty-five years before. Throughout his essays he quotes passages he admires, now from Chaucer, now from Dryden, now from Spenser or Shakespeare or some minor poet; all with scarce an exception have imaginative appeal and grace of diction. It is worthy of note that the presence of these qualities rather than of conspicuous moral elements gave the determining impulse to his choice.

Imagination indeed with its various phases and distinctions allured him. He liked to discuss it, to point out that in its higher form it is "the faculty that shapes, gives unity of design and balanced gravitation of parts"; that it has a secondary office where it is interpreter of the artist's conception into words; that there is a distinction between the two modes of performing this function. Lowell once or twice tries to apply his distinctions, as where he concedes to Shakespeare

the creative imagination which bodies forth the thought, and to Milton the pictorial imagination, which merely images it forth.[1] But such subtleties seemed to bore him and he was content for the most part to use the term in a general sense. In Dante's imagination there is "intense realism"; Spenser was "more habitually possessed by his imagination than is usual even with poets."[2] Taking imagination in a general sense he sometimes suggested distinctions of kind, as where he declares Keats amply possessed of "penetrative and sympathetic imagination,"[3] and Carlyle of "conceptive imagination vigorous beyond any in his generation."[4]

Lowell's references to imagination are so frequent, his tone in conceding it is so certain, that one notes with surprise his failure to perceive it. He denied creative imagination to the author of *Duty* and *Laodamia* and *Intimations of Immortality*,[5] going so far as to say: "Wordsworth was wholly void of that shaping imagination which is the highest criterion of a poet."[6] He was uncertain whether the great gift of his favorite Calderon were imagination or fancy. In his essay on Chaucer there is no mention of *Troilus and Criseyde*, although the imagination which created Criseyde is akin to Shakespeare's own. Robert Greene, whose *Friar Bacon* and *James IV.* are "bright-

[1] *Works*, iii., 40. [2] *Ibid.*, iv., 343. [3] *Ibid.*, i., 243.
[4] *Ibid.*, ii., 90. [5] *Ibid.*, iii., 35. [6] *Ibid.*, ii., 78.

some" with imagination and whose Dorothea neither Chaucer nor Shakespeare would have scorned to own, is "naught,"[1] and "had a genius for being dull at all times."[2]

If Lowell's frequent discussions of the imagination lead one to concede him an ability to recognize it which he sometimes disappoints, one hesitates to accuse him of defective penetration. Many things would seem to proclaim the falsity of such a judgment. "Rousseau cries, 'I will bare my heart to you!' and, throwing open his waistcoat, makes us the confidants of his dirty linen."[3] There is a glimpse of Rousseau the *poseur* which remains in the memory. Again: "History, in the true sense, he (Carlyle) does not and cannot write, for he looks on mankind as a herd without volition, and without moral force."[4] And again: "The radical vice of his (Thoreau's) theory of life was that he confounded physical with spiritual remoteness from men."[5] There is penetration here. Each statement, one expects, will be used as a basis on which far-reaching explanations can be made. If Rousseau were a *poseur*, did this weakness

[1] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 19.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 20. Lowell's animosity becomes explicable but not his denial of all virtue to so imaginative a poet as Greene when one reads: "He (Greene) it was that called Shakespeare 'an upstart crow beautified with our feathers,' as if any one could have any use for feathers from such birds as he." *Old English Dramatists*, p. 19.

[3] *Works*, ii., 261. [4] *Ibid.*, ii., 118. [5] *Ibid.*, i., 373.

modify his influence? Was it a fundamental weakness? Did it betray itself in any essential ways? How far is it reconcilable with the "faith and . . . ardor of conviction" which the critic says were in him? Lowell does not state. He discusses instead the absence of sincerity in autobiographies in general. If Carlyle were incapable of writing history, why not point out his important lapses in the *French Revolution* and in *Frederick?* Why not make the weakness of Carlyle's philosophy prove itself the basic weakness of Carlyle the historian, and show how one fundamental misconception has many ramifications? To say that Carlyle's "historical compositions are wonderful prose poems"[1]; to declare that his "appreciation is less psychological than physical and external,"[2] is to remain on the surface of things and to toy with the incidental. Such points have their place; but their place is subsidiary. If the radical vice of Thoreau's theory of life were his confounding of physical with spiritual remoteness from men, why is this vice not considered as radical and made to explain his idiosyncrasies? Why should Thoreau make such a mistake and how came he to persist in it? Has it any bearing on his work? What connection has it with his egotism, with his sentimentalism? To accuse Thoreau of morbid self-consciousness, of unhealthiness of mind, of lack

[1] *Works*, ii., 102. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 103.

of humor, is to hide the flash of penetration in a mass of cloud.

This weakness of Lowell points the way to others. It has been said that he seldom failed to notice the various qualities of an author. Some he discusses or illustrates; others he merely mentions. Their inter-relation seems to elude him. In *Dryden* he speaks of the poet's faith in himself, tendency to exaggeration, inequality, strength of understanding, and so on. He points out qualities as if they had as little vital connection with one another or with the poet to whom they belonged as his coat or hat or gloves. Lowell himself seems conscious that an array of qualities which might be found in many poets tells nothing in particular about Dryden. At the end of the essay he seeks to emphasize the poet's salient qualities. This passage and the method are typical:

> Was he, then, a great poet? Hardly, in the narrowest definition. But he was a strong thinker who sometimes carried common sense to a height where it catches the light of a diviner air, and warmed reason till it had well-nigh the illuminating property of intuition . . . He sees, among other things, that a man who undertakes to write should first have a meaning perfectly defined to himself, and then should be able to set it forth clearly in the best words. This is precisely Dryden's praise, and . . . to read him is as bracing as a northwest wind . . . In mind and manner his foremost quality is energy. In ripeness of

mind and bluff heartiness of expression, he takes rank with the best. His phrase is always a shortcut to his sense . . . He had . . . the gift of the right word. And if he does not, like one or two of the greater masters of song, stir our sympathies by that indefinable aroma so magical in arousing the subtile associations of the soul, he has this in common with the few great writers, that the winged seeds of his thought embed themselves in the memory and germinate there.[1]

There can be little question about the soundness of all this. But why stop here? Are these qualities peculiar to Dryden? What one or two of them or what combination of them explains him? Is the poet thus designated John Dryden and no one else? Are these qualities a sufficient explanation of *St. Cecilia's Day*, the *Hind and Panther*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, and the lyrics in the dramas? Do we know this Dryden, his mind or his genius? Do we know what was fundamental in them, from which other characteristics had their rise? Have we got at the very pulse of the machine or have we merely been directed to a mass of cog-wheels and pulleys, all unassembled, with the remark that this one is large and that one small, but never a word about the interplay of parts or the function of each in the total mechanism? Lowell realizes this weakness; he will point out the radical element in Dryden's greatness: "What gave and secures

[1] *Works*, iii., 188 ff.

for him this singular eminence? To put it in a single word, I think that his qualities and faculties were in that rare combination which makes character. This gave *flavor* to whatever he wrote,—a very rare quality."[1] One cannot but ask: Is that the answer?

What is the ultimate quality of Keats? "Enough that we recognize in Keats that indefinable newness and unexpectedness which we call genius."[2] Is this the answer? If so, how shall we explain Euclid and Napoleon and Leonardo da Vinci, to say nothing of the great names of literature? What is the secret of Dante's power? "The secret of Dante's power is not far to seek. Whoever can express *himself* with the full force of unconscious sincerity will be found to have uttered something ideal and universal."[3] Is that the answer? And Chaucer—what of him? "In short, Chaucer had that fine literary sense which is as rare as genius, and, united with it, as it was in him, assures an immortality of fame."[4] Is that the answer? Was fine literary sense, united to genius, peculiar to Chaucer? United *as they were in him?* That is just the question; and it goes unanswered.

In his essay on Wordsworth,[5] Richard Holt Hutton lays down what he considers the ultimate characteristic of Wordsworth the poet:

[1] *Works*, iii., 188. [2] *Ibid.*, i., 242. [3] ***Ibid.***, iv., 258.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 331. [5] *Essays in Literary Criticism.*

He could detach his mind from the commonplace series of impressions which are generated by commonplace objects or events, resist and often reverse the current of emotion to which ordinary minds are liable, and triumphantly justify the strain of rapture with which he celebrated what excites either no feeling, or weary feeling, or painful feeling, in the mass of unreflecting men.

The essay which follows is an exposition of that sentence. No phase of the poet's mind or art is isolated; the inter-relations are made clear, and constantly the critic returns to emphasize again the ultimate characteristic of Wordsworth's genius. When Hutton says: "Wordsworth . . . was almost a miser in his reluctance to trench upon the spiritual capital at his disposal," we recognize the critic's penetration in the remark. But he does not stop there; he expands and explains and shows the relation between this "spiritual frugality" and that characteristic of the poet which he had already laid down as fundamental. When he puts his finger on the vital spot of Wordsworth's faculty, he evokes our assent, not a shock of surprise at a deduction whose premises have been but vaguely suggested.

His (Wordsworth's) poetic faculty lies, I think, in contemplatively seizing the characteristic individual *influences* which all living things, from the very smallest of earth or air up to man and the Spirit of

God, radiate around them to every mind that will surrender itself to their expressive power.

Here is penetration; coming as it does, it is not like a flash of lightning in the dark, but like the sunlight, steady, luminous, making bright far corners and dim recesses.

When Matthew Arnold writes on Wordsworth,[1] he insists upon the acceptance of his own understanding of poetic greatness: "The noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness." He continues:

A great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, . . . of the ideas

"On man, on nature, and on human life,"

which he has acquired for himself.

The essay is an endeavor to show that Wordsworth's superiority as a poet arises from "his powerful application to his subject" of such ideas. There is no deviation from the question; the critic is insistent on his primary definition; he constantly recurs to it, each time letting his exposition become a little more comprehensive and yet keeping it specific. His final explanation of the poet is consequent from his premises; it is penetrating, as Hutton's is penetrating, and for a similar reason:

[1] *Essays in Criticism* (2d series).

Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and beauties; and because of the extraordinary power with which in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.

One may not accept the conclusions of Arnold and Hutton; one may quarrel with Arnold's definition of poetry. But one cannot fail to perceive that their penetration is an essentially different thing from Lowell's.

Such conclusions as these of Hutton and Arnold do more than throw light on the quality of Lowell's penetration. They make clear the evil of Lowell's method. Laying out to view, as he did, an array of separate qualities of different degrees of importance, and treating each in isolated fashion, without any reference to some radical principle either in the mind or art of the author, Lowell cannot be acquitted of sinning against rhetoric on the one hand and against criticism on the other. His essays lack that unity which comes from the presence of a dominant idea, a thesis to be supported, or a point of view steadily maintained. They leave the reader's mind confused by the array of unrelated qualities mustered by the critic, whose endeavor toward the end of his essay to concentrate upon some ultimate quality as the explanation of the author, results in gener-

alities. Characteristics, instead of being focused into one, and that circumstanced and defined till it fits the single author with a nice and inevitable finality, are dissipated into the vague of a general term. Not that Lowell always even makes an endeavor to reach the ultimate quality. In *Spenser* he seems to come close to it without intention when he declares:

> The exultation with which love sometimes subtilizes the nerves of coarsest men so that they feel and see not the thing as it seems to others, but the beauty of it, the joy of it, the soul of eternal youth that is in it, would appear to have been the normal condition of Spenser.

But if he has touched the robes of the goddess he seems not to know it; for he does not make exaltation of mind serve to explain the other qualities of Spenser which he indicates,—his joyousness, his epicureanism of language, his fervor. It is much the same in *Dryden:* he seems to have his finger on the poet's pulse, but soon loses it.

> This preponderance in him (Dryden) of the reasoning over the intuitive faculties, the one always there, the other flashing in when you least expect it, accounts for that inequality and even incongruousness in his writings which makes one revise one's judgment at every tenth page.[1]

[1] *Works*, iii., 120.

Does it account for other things, this preponderance, for virtues as well as vices? And what of this judgment which it forces us to revise at every tenth page? "He is a prose writer, with a kind of Æolian attachment"[1]; he was not primarily a poet.[2] And yet, "poet he surely was *intus*, though not always *in cute*,"[3] and so on. Is it too much to say that though Lowell has his finger on the poet's pulse he loses it and that his observations tend to confuse instead of to clarify? In *Shakespeare* he masses up in the last few pages the poet's qualities; each was possessed in the highest degree; there is no suggestion of a radical property of the poet's mind or art in which all inhere, no suggestion of any inter-relation between them. Out of the aggregate of qualities, our conception of the poet wavers like a creature of the mist: if sincere shall we know it for Dante, if original for Wordsworth, if endowed with character for Dryden?

It is unfortunate that Lowell ignored the historical method or felt it too difficult for his powers. It is equally unfortunate that for similar reasons his was not a biographical method of the type of Sainte-Beuve's. If the impressions left upon us by Lowell's essays are vague, so also are the figures of their subjects. Even the outer appearance of a poet helps to persuade us of his reality, and to make him ultimately more comprehensible because

[1] *Works*, iii., 120. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 123. [3] *Ibid.*, iii., 127.

more like ourselves. Chaucer's

> downcast eyes, half-shy, half-meditative, the sensuous mouth, the broad brow, drooping with weight of thought, and yet with an inexpugnable youth shining out of it as from the morning forehead of a boy, are all noticeable, and not less so their harmony of placid tenderness. We are struck, too, with the smoothness of the face as of one who thought easily, whose phrase flowed naturally, and who had never puckered his brow over an unmanageable verse.[1]

For a moment one feels that Chaucer was of the earth earthy, a man like ourselves. If Chaucer's life is a secret well-nigh buried with him, how he would seem to live again, how much new vitality would have a renascence in his works if only his times were drawn for us! What were those brave old days like, when men went on pilgrimages over-seas or at home in England to the shrine of Canterbury? When Wat Tyler could ride into London with a rabble at his heels and the handsome boy-king could thrust a knife into his breast and put down a rebellion with a smile and a promise? One wonders whether Lowell felt that this method lay beyond his powers, or whether he failed to see its advantages.

The biographical method of Sainte-Beuve, Lowell himself attests, makes the French critic's subject luminous.[2] But in the American critic's essays for the most part there is little biography,

[1] *Works*, iii., 294. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 166.

except of a perfunctory kind. *Dryden* represents his best endeavor to interweave biography with criticism. The poet's life as a chronological sequence is followed to some extent in order to make clear the development of his genius. Born in 1631, his earliest verses, those on the death of Hastings, "are as bad as they can be." After ten fallow years he at length makes his appearance again in heroic stanzas on the death of Cromwell. "Next we have, in 1660, *Astræa Redux* on the 'happy restoration' of Charles II.," in which one can "forebode little of the full-grown Dryden but his defects." Meanwhile Dryden's taste gradually rises—as his prefaces attest—from "Cowley to Milton, from Corneille to Shakespeare."[1] It was the *Annus Mirabilis* written in his thirty-seventh year by which he "won a general acknowledgment of his powers."[2] Dryden as a dramatist is next taken up: "In the thirty-two years between 1662 and 1694, he produced twenty-five plays." Here ends the attempt at following the sequence of Dryden's life; the rest of the essay is a discussion of the poet as "satirist and pleader in verse," his prefaces and translations and his various general qualities. In *Dante*, Lowell approaches nearest among his essays to that method which in the hands of Sainte-Beuve became not merely biographical, but psychological. Dante's writings, he says, "are all (with the possible exception of

[1] *Works*, iii., 123. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 133.

De Vulgari Eloquio) autobiographic, and all of them, including that, are parts of a mutually related system of which the central part is the individuality and experience of the poet." The critic tries to make the various works explain the poet. The *Vita Nuova*, for example,

> recounts the story of his love for Beatrice Portinari, showing how his grief for her loss turned his thoughts first inward upon his own consciousness, and, failing all help there, gradually upward through philosophy to religion and so from a world of shadows to one of eternal substances.[1]

Dante's other works are taken up briefly in turn and the critic hurries on to the *Divina Commedia*. The essay soon becomes a commentary on Dante's masterpiece, with discussions now and then of his qualities—his conservatism, his mystical turn of mind, his endowment of memory and genius, and so on. Here Lowell goes back to his usual method: an enumeration of characteristics not necessarily having inter-relation, not emanating from the same radical elements in the poet's mind or art. He is at pains to explain Dante's philosophy, the "discrepancy between the Lady of the *Vita Nuova* and her of the *Convito*" and the like, nor "does he speak without book." But when all is said, does Lowell reveal to us the development of that strangely isolated individual, either as moral

[1] *Works*, iv., 148.

being or as poet? Does he make us feel the unity of this man who as Prior of Florence could exile his dearest friend Cavalcanti, and yet weep to see the hapless lovers blown for evermore upon the shrilling winds of Hell; of this poet whose equal vision could gaze upon the horrors of Malebolge and the celestial splendors of the Infinite? In a word, has Lowell penetrated into the heart of this Dante, and realized beneath his various qualities the psychological unity which underlay the man and the poet? One thinks of Sainte-Beuve, of his power of reanimating the men and women of the past, of placing them over against friends and foes, of making them reveal their works, and their works in turn reveal them, until we view them through the eyes of the sanest and broadest and most penetrating of their contemporaries. One thinks of Carlyle, of those "portrait-devouring eyes" of his, which would have looked into the soul of Dante and made both heart and mind of him yield their secrets. If one seems to demand too much of Lowell by the implication of such comparisons, there is Arnold, a critic in his own tongue and of his own immediate time.

Writing of Keats,[1] Arnold points out that Keats is eminent for the sensuousness of his poetry. "The question with some people will be, whether he is anything else." From one angle, Keats seems to have no character, no self-control, qualities

[1] *Essays in Criticism* (2d Series).

indispensable for the great artist. Here is Arnold's thesis, direct, simple, falling back upon his theory of poetry as an interpretation of life:

> We who believe Keats to have been by his promise, at any rate, if not fully by his performance, one of the very greatest of English poets, and who believe also that a merely sensuous man cannot either by promise or by performance be a very great poet, because poetry interprets life, and so large and noble a part of life is outside of such a man's ken,—we cannot but look for signs in him of something more than sensuousness, for signs of character and virtue.

And with deftness and insight, the critic sets about his task. He quotes Houghton and George Keats in attestation of the poet's high qualities, and he looks "for whatever illustrates and confirms" their testimony. Keats' own words are quoted: one gets to understand that this sensuous and sensitive consumptive was possessed of admirable wisdom and temper; of a determination to "fag on as others do at periodical literature," to avoid endangering his independence and his self-respect; of fortitude in the face of unjust criticism, and so on. And out of it all "the thing to be seized on is that Keats had flint and iron in him, that he had character." And what else of him?

> "I have loved the principle of beauty in all things" and "if I had had time I would have made myself re-

membered." He *has* made himself remembered and remembered as no merely sensuous poet could be; and he has done it by having "loved the principle of beauty in all things."

In his *Keats*, Lowell sketches the poet's life. He tells us that Keats "longed for fame, but longed above all to deserve it"; that he took the attacks upon *Endymion* in a manly way. "A man cannot have a sensuous nature and be pachydermatous at the same time, and if he be imaginative as well as sensuous, he suffers just in proportion to the amount of his imagination." Keats finally goes to Italy broken in health, and we are given a letter of his from Naples, feverish, pitiful. He dies and is buried in Rome with that pathetic epitaph upon his gravestone.[1] One asks: Is that all? Is there nothing beneath that eagerness to deserve fame, that manly bearing up under attack, that sensuous nature and imaginative temperament, the feverish morbidity of that letter from Naples? Is there not a radical unity there which makes all these things congruous? One need not believe that Arnold has gone to the root of the matter; but there is penetration, psychological penetration, in his brief study.

Lowell, one remembers, was essentially a man of books. It is significant that he could write: "Nor am I offended with this odor of the library

[1] "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

that hangs about Gray, for it recalls none but delightful associations."[1] The tenor of his way was apart from the highroad of men, far from the heat and din of the market-place. One associates him with Cambridge, with long hours spent over favorite volumes, with a handful of intimates at whist or dinner, or fulfilling the duties of classroom or sanctum. Did he understand men? One recalls his letter to Briggs in 1845, lamenting that as a man he was not appreciated or understood, and that other letter to Holmes with its pert condemnation of a man ten years his senior whom he scarcely knew. Then there is his letter to the editor of *Putnam's*, condemning as the "mob" that public which was bored by his impossible comic poem; there are the recondite allusions constantly cropping out in his political essays and the sophomoricisms in his literary studies which offend good taste—one wonders if the man who was guilty of these lapses really understood men himself. In Lowell's letters one finds no evidence of psychological penetration and the same is true of those of his dispatches from Madrid which we now have as *Impressions of Spain*. One gets delightful sketches of men from the outside, like that of Franklin Pierce,[2] and that more elaborate one of Canovas in the Spanish dispatches.[3] There is no quarrel with these; it

[1] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 39.

[2] *Letters*, i., 302 ff.

[3] *Impressions of Spain*, p. 29 ff.

may even be that one has no right to expect more. But one has a right to look for psychological insight in the critical essays; if it is wanting in them can they be called *critical* in any serious sense? This question is worth further consideration.

In his essay on Carlyle, Lowell discusses Carlyle the man. "In the earlier part of his literary career Mr. Carlyle was the preacher up of sincerity, manliness, and a living faith. . . . He had intense convictions and he made disciples." He became popular: "His fervor, his oddity of manner, his pugnacious paradox, drew the crowd." Once become popular, "he must attract, he must astonish." Why was this necessity upon him? *Because the excitement of making a sensation becomes a necessity of the successful author.*[1] Carlyle, he goes on, "continues to be a voice crying in the wilderness, but no longer a voice with any earnest conviction behind it." Whether this conclusion be just or not, one need not stop to inquire. But one is obliged to ask, is there psychological penetration behind that conclusion? Has the crier-down of sham become himself a "mountebank of genius" *because the excitement of making a sensation becomes a necessity of the successful author?* In *Rousseau*, after following faithfully in the wake of the critic, one is finally forced to ask: Is Rousseau after all only a baffling psychological anomaly, an aggregate of irreconcilable contradictions?

[1] *Works*, ii., 107. The italics are mine.

Here is the critic's answer: "It would be sheer waste of time to hunt Rousseau through all his doublings of inconsistency, and run him to earth in every new paradox." When Lowell writes of Gray, he shows a certain penetration born of sympathy for one in whom he saw a weakness akin to his own. Bonstetten, he says, records the melancholy from which Gray suffered, and for which Sainte-Beuve accounted by alleging "la stérilité d'un talent poétique si distingué, si rare, mais si avare." Says Lowell:

Sainte-Beuve is perhaps partly right, but it may be fairly surmised that the remorse for intellectual indolence should have had some share in making Gray unwilling to recall the time when he was better employed than in filling in coats-of-arms on the margin of Dugdale and correcting the Latin of Linnæus.

And behind that intellectual indolence—what? . . . It is worth while to quote Arnold. Writing on Gray, Arnold also quotes Bonstetten; then he adds:

Sainte-Beuve, who was much attracted and interested by Gray, doubts whether Bonstetten's explanation of him is admissible[1]; the secret of Gray's melancholy he finds rather in the sterility of his poetic talent, . . . in the poet's despair at his own unproductiveness. But to explain Gray, we must do more than allege his

[1] Bonstetten had said: "I believe that Gray had never loved; this was the key to the riddle."

sterility, as we must look further than to his seclusion at Cambridge. What caused his sterility? Was it his ill-health, his hereditary gout? . . . What gave the power to Gray's reclusion and ill-health to induce his sterility?[1]

Arnold's answer is this: Gray fell upon an age of prose; "with the qualities of mind and soul of a genuine poet," he was "born out of date, a man whose full spiritual flowering was impossible."[2] Whether or not one agree with Arnold's conclusion one comes to realize that there is a difference between that penetration which stops short and that other which seeks to pierce to the heart of things. One might go on, examining the essays in detail; the conclusion is inescapable: the quest for anything approaching sustained psychological penetration will go unrewarded.

This weakness for stopping short of the ultimate betrays itself in other ways. In *Lessing*, Lowell discusses the German type of mind, its "inability or disinclination to see a thing as it really is, unless it be a matter of science."[3] But still it is a thorough mind to which we owe much. He goes on:

The sense of heaviness which creeps over the reader from so many German books is mainly due, we suspect, to the language, which seems well-nigh incapable of that aërial perspective so delightful in first-rate French

[1] *Essays in Criticism* (2d series), p. 90 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 92 ff.
[3] *Works*, ii., 163.

and even English writing. But there must also be in the national character an insensibility to proportion, a want of that instinctive discretion which we call tact.[1]

Speaking of the Germans, Arnold says:

You have the Germanic genius: *steadiness with honesty*. . . . Steadiness with honesty; the danger for a national spirit thus composed is the humdrum, the plain and ugly, the ignoble: in a word, *das Gemeine, die Gemeinheit* . . . The excellence of a national spirit thus composed is freedom from whim, flightiness, perseverance; patient fidelity to Nature,—in a word, *science*. . . The universal dead-level of plainness and homeliness, the lack of all beauty and distinction in form and feature, the slowness and clumsiness of the language . . . this is the weak side.[2]

One sees that Arnold has delved under Lowell and sought the ultimate.

Such weakness in penetration as one finds in Lowell, betrayed itself at times in his uncertain groping for the exact thought which he wanted to express. He seems to be seeking to pierce through his impressions to what was exact and basic beyond them.

How unlike is the operation of the imaginative faculty in him (Chaucer) and Shakespeare! When the latter describes, his epithets imply always an impression on

[1] *Works*, ii., 167. [2] *Celtic Literature*, p. 74.

the moral sense (so to speak) of the person who hears or sees. The sun "flatters the mountain-tops with sovereign eye"; the bending "weeds lacquey the dull stream"; the shadow of the falcon "coucheth the fowl below"; the smoke is "helpless"; when Tarquin enters the chamber of Lucrece "the threshold grates the door to have him heard." His outward sense is merely a window through which the metaphysical eye looks forth, and his mind passes over at once from the simple sensation to the complex *meaning* of it,—feels *with* the object instead of merely feeling it. His imagination is forever dramatizing. Chaucer gives only the direct impression made on the eye or ear.[1]

One can imagine readily with what incisiveness and yet with what breadth of implication Coleridge would have put that thought. Comparing Schiller and Shakespeare, Coleridge says: "Schiller has the material sublime; to produce an effect, he sets you a whole town on fire, and throws infants with their mothers into the flames, or locks up a father in an old tower. But Shakespeare drops a handkerchief and the same or greater effects follow."[2] Instances of this groping are common enough in Lowell. Regarding Spenser he says: "He is full of feeling, and yet of such a kind that we can neither say it is mere intellectual perception of what is fair and good, nor yet associate it with that throbbing fervor which leads us to call

[1] *Works*, iii., 354 ff.
[2] Coleridge's *Works*, vi., 255 ff.

sensibility by the physical name of heart."[1] Again: [Chaucer]

> is original, not in the sense that he thinks and says . . . what nobody can ever think and say again, but because he is always natural, because, if not always absolutely new, he is always delightfully fresh, because he sets before us the world as it honestly appeared to Geoffrey Chaucer, and not a world as it seemed proper to certain people that it ought to appear.[2]

At other times, Lowell's weakness in penetration gives one the feeling that words are being forced to do the duty of ideas. Shakespeare's moral, he tells us, "is the moral of worldly wisdom only heightened to the level of his wide-viewing mind, and made typical by the dramatic energy of his plastic nature."[3] The critic was not consciously superficial; he had without doubt a feeling that there was a point to be made. But in instances like these, he seems to have crystallized that feeling not into thought but into language. His phrasal power indeed, so characteristic of poets in their prose, sometimes wins us to an acceptance of his statements as charged with a thoughtfulness or penetration which they will not yield on analysis. The following is worth examination:

Had Shakespeare been born fifty years earlier, he

[1] Lowell's *Works*, iv., 326.
[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 361.
[3] *Ibid.*, iii., 324.

would have been cramped by a book-language not yet flexible enough for the demands of rhythmic emotion, not yet sufficiently popularized for the natural and familiar expression of supreme thought, not yet so rich in metaphysical phrase as to render possible that ideal representation of the great passions which is the aim and end of Art, not yet subdued by practice and general consent to a definiteness of accentuation essential to ease and congruity of metrical arrangement.[1]

One recalls that Berner's Froissart, in 1523, "made a landmark in our tongue"[2]; that Tyndale's *Translation of the New Testament*, in 1525, "fixed our standard English once for all."[3] One recalls that Chaucer, who had died in 1400, had surprised words "into grace, ease, and dignity

[1] *Works*, iii., 2.

[2] Brooke, *English Literature*, p. 83.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 84. "Tyndale's translation of the New Testament is the most important philological monument of the first half of the sixteenth century, perhaps I should say of the whole period between Chaucer and Shakespeare." It "more than anything else contributed to shape and fix the sacred dialect, and establish the form which the Bible must permanently assume in an English dress. The best features of the translation of 1611 are derived from the version of Tyndale, and thus that remarkable work has exerted, directly and indirectly, a more powerful influence on the English language than any other single production between the ages of Richard II. and Queen Elizabeth." Marsh, *English Language*, p. 113. Says Brooke, *English Literature*, p. 84: "Of the 6000 words of the *Authorized Version* still in great part his (Tyndale's) translation, only 250 are not now in common use."

in their own despite," had achieved an "airiness of sentiment and expression, a felicity of phrase and an elegance of turn"; that he was great in narrative, in description, in command of satire, of pathos, of humor, and yet withal "he was also one of the best versifiers that ever made English trip and sing . . . every foot beats time to the tune of the thought."[1] If, finally then, Chaucer in the latter part of the fourteenth century could make language to his will because "he was a great poet, to whom measure was a natural vehicle,"[2] are we to believe that a greater poet, with the language of Tyndale as well as that of Chaucer, would have made *Venus and Adonis* a less notable *première œuvre* of genius had it been possible to come from his hands in 1543 instead of in 1593?

This subject of the possibilities of language in the hands of a poet is a favorite one with Lowell. He is constantly emphasizing the value of diction. "Men's thoughts and opinions are in a great degree vassals of him who invents a new phrase or reapplies an old epithet. The thought or feeling a thousand times repeated becomes his at last who utters it best."[3] He likes also to discuss a poet's use of words, and to trace influences of versification and of style.[4]

[1] *Works*, iii., 329; 322; 351; 323; 352; 336.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 345. [3] *Ibid.*, i., 245.

[4] The influences he discovers are sometimes confusing: Milton's teacher in versification was Marlowe (*Works*, i., 277); later he

It may be thought [he says in *Spenser*], that I lay too much stress on this single attribute of diction. But . . . it should be remembered that it is subtle perfection of phrase and that happy coalescence of music and meaning, where each reinforces the other, that define a man as poet and make all ears converts and partisans.[1]

When Lowell comes to the discussion of prose writers, one expects him to pay the same attention to the influence of ideas as, in the case of poets, he paid to diction. Has Carlyle exerted a definite influence on the thought of his generation? He revealed, says Lowell, to those who listened to him in his prime, the "sublime reserves of power even the humblest may find in manliness, sincerity, and self-reliance."[2] We must be content with the indefinite statement that he had great value as "an inspirer and awakener."[2] As for Emerson: "What does he mean, quotha? He means inspiring hints, a divining-rod to your deeper nature."[3] Has he exerted a definite influence on his generation? Lowell answers: much of the country's "intellectual emancipation was due to the stimulus of his teaching and example"; he kept burning "the beacon of an ideal life above our lower region

says Spenser (*Works*, iv., 305); later still he convinces himself "of what I had long taken for granted, that his versification was mainly modelled on the Italian and especially on the *Divina Commedia*." (*Letters*, ii., 386.)

[1] *Works*, iv., 308. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 118. [3] *Ibid.*, i., 352.

of turmoil." What has he told us definitely in *Rousseau* about sentimentalism? What has he told us at all about the influence of Richardson in France or in Europe, or about his connection with Rousseau? In *Coleridge* what has he said definitely about the influence of the greatest of English critics? His "service was incalculable"; the subtle apprehension of his mind seems an instinct; he was "the first in noting some of the more occult phenomena of thought and emotion." And Fielding? He discusses his comedies, but says of his influence only that he was an originator who invented the realistic novel.[1] What of the influence of these men, what pregnant ideas of theirs took root and modified the opinions or thoughts of others? One will meet, it must be confessed, no satisfactory answer to this question by a diligent search through Lowell's works.

It has already been pointed out that Lowell's sympathy with certain phases of literature was imperfect. That imperfect sympathy was due not only to a certain narrowness in Lowell himself but to the inadequacy of his penetration. In his works and letters one finds few references to the novelists; his *Fielding* is not the work of a man who regarded the novel as a type of literary expression which even before his own day had become of prime importance. His chief interest in fiction

[1] *Works*, vi., 64.

seems to have been as a relaxation.[1] No hint appears that he realized how powerful a factor the novel had become in modern-day life; how much of the place once occupied by Chaucer and Spenser, by Shakespeare and the Elizabethan dramatists, by Dryden and Pope and Restoration Comedy, has been gradually preëmpted by Richardson and Fielding and Scott and Jane Austen, and in Lowell's own day by Thackeray and Dickens and George Eliot. In the hands of these masters, the novel was a work of art as certainly as the narrative poem with Chaucer and the drama with Shakespeare. *The Newcomes* and *David Copperfield* and *Middlemarch* have a deeper significance than the passing of a pleasant hour. They are the expression of their day, its doubts and fears, its faith, its opinions, its aspirations. Lowell demanded of poetry that it be the expression of its own time; but this other literary form, which had come to be the most powerful vehicle of human emotion, seems to have had to his mind no significance. In his eyes Fielding had been a great man, for all men have accepted him and he is a classic. But he is of interest to the critic not for what he stands for of himself, but because he can be referred to in connection with Chaucer and Shakespeare.

To weakness of penetration no less than to

[1] *Letters*, i., 390 ff. Cf. *Letters*, ii., 433: "I read novels . . . a new habit with me."

imperfect sympathy is also to be ascribed Lowell's sweeping condemnation of Victorian poets who have employed Greek and medieval themes. The pivotal point, he holds, of Greek motivation is Fate and thus an essential difference separates the Greeks from us.[1] Thus the Greek point of view must be to our eyes purely factitious; *Merope* and *Atalanta* and the rest are ultimately not a reality but an imitation.[2] Lowell, it is worth remembering, does not level his criticisms against other than Victorian poets who sought Greek or medieval themes. It may be that his conservatism would not warrant his pushing his belief to its logical conclusion and thus including in his condemnation a line of poets from Chaucer through Keats. The merit of his contention in the abstract need not detain us. But one feels that he has failed to see that the Greek spirit and the medieval spirit have not without reason attracted many minds in the nineteenth century; that it is this spirit, only when clothed in essential humanity, which is ultimately the life-giving element in the Greek and the medieval stories; that love and hatred and desire and the heartbreak of shattered ideals are of all time and may be woven into a Grecian boar-hunt or a tournament below Camelot, as well as into the life of modern Boston or London.[3] Lowell seems to

[1] *Works*, ii., 124 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 134.
[3] On this point cf. Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*, p. 97.

have limited his objections to poetry. Against Scott's novels he makes no protest. Perhaps it is significant of the relatively unimportant place which the novel occupies in his mind in comparison with poetry, that he should object to the theme of the *Idylls of the King* but not to that of *Ivanhoe*.

In more than one notable instance, one finds Lowell strangely oblivious to merits which are too eminent to pass without recognition. One reads: "The Saxon was never, to any great extent, a literary language."[1] Again: "The Anglo-Saxons never had any real literature of their own. They produced monkish chronicles in bad Latin, and legends of saints in worse metre."[2] Lowell would probably not assume so dogmatic an attitude to-day, since during the last forty years there have become more widespread an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon language and an appreciation of the Anglo-Saxon literature. Lowell was a student of the language, it is true, but always the conservative, was not the man to blaze new paths, even in the domain of literature. With no less surprise one notes his failure in his *Chaucer* to mention *Troilus and Criseyde*, that study of feminine psychology unsurpassed in English literature for subtlety and penetration. Here again, however, one is to remember that adequate appreciation of this poem was not usual a generation ago. The question comes to mind: Would not a genuine

[1] *Works*, iii., 11. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 320.

penetration have triumphed over such conservatism and proclaimed a merit even though but few eyes had already perceived it?

One more phase of Lowell's lack of penetration remains to be noted. In discussing the Elizabethan dramatists, he says: "To some of them we cannot deny genius, but creative genius we must deny to all of them, and dramatic genius as well."[1] This seems a surprising statement when one recalls *The Silent Woman*, *New Way to Pay Old Debts*, and *The Maid's Tragedy*, to name no more. But Lowell's attitude is not difficult to understand. The Elizabethan dramatists, he assures us, are "the best comment . . . to convince us of the immeasurable superiority of Shakespeare."[2] It has already been pointed out that Lowell's attitude towards Shakespeare is one of admiration to which no laudation seems extravagant. He is the "miracle of Stratford," and in the process of his apotheosis, "creative genius" and "dramatic genius" must be held as the sacred possession of him alone. What again becomes of Lowell's penetration? Before the radiant figure of his literary god, it seems to vanish into thin air.

[1] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 24. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

CHAPTER VI

LOWELL'S TYPE OF MIND

LOWELL, it has been already suggested, was a conservative. "I was always a natural tory," he wrote, "and in England . . . should be a staunch one. I would not give up a thing that had roots to it, though it might suck up its food from graveyards."[1] In religion, also, whatever doubts may have assailed him, he was a conservative.[2] "I look upon a belief as none the worse but rather the better for being hereditary, prizing as I do whatever helps to give continuity to the being and doing of man, and an accumulated force to his character."[3] In the sphere of literature it was the same. He approaches a consideration of the classics of language with a realization that they are great by universal consent and with a determination to find in them what others have discovered. "What," he asks, "is a classic, if it be not a book that forever delights, inspires, and surprises,—in which and in ourselves, by its help, we make new discoveries every day?"[4] Works

[1] *Letters*, ii., 136. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 325. [3] *Ibid.*, ii., 152.
[4] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 143.

which have lasted generations he cannot approach except from the traditional viewpoint of acceptance. His whole attitude may be seen in his experience with *Hamlet:*

> Many years ago . . . I pleased myself with imagining the play of Hamlet published under some *alias*, as the work of a new candidate in literature. Then I *played* . . . that it came in regular course before some well-meaning doer of criticisms, who had never read the original, . . . and endeavored to conceive the kind of way in which he would be likely to take it. I put myself in his place, and tried to write such a perfunctory notice as I thought would be likely, in filling his column, to satisfy his conscience. But it was a *tour de force* . . . I could not arrive at that artistic absorption in my own conception which would enable me to be natural . . . My result was a dead failure . . . I could not shake off that strange accumulation which we call self, and report honestly what I saw and felt even to myself, much less to others.[1]

This is the epitome of Lowell's conservatism as it concerns the classics of literature.

Not so fundamental as Lowell's conservatism, though none the less an element in him with which one must reckon, was his enthusiasm, which has been spoken of in another place. His enthusiasm, positive and negative, if it may be so distinguished, is scarcely ever in abeyance. One can feel it

[1] *Works*, iii., 28 ff.

gathering in intensity as it proceeds. Starting with the declaration, "My respect for what Lessing was, and for what he did, is profound," Lowell's expression of respect moves onward through "Greater poets she (Germany) has had, but no greater writer," till by the end of a page it becomes such high admiration as this:

> The figure of Goethe is grand, it is rightfully pre-eminent, it has something of the calm, and something of the coldness, of the immortals; but the Valhalla of German letters can show one form, in its simple manhood, statelier even than his.[1]

The critic's enthusiasms in the case of many authors were abiding but so exclusive in their nature as to lead him into extravagances of statement which he was afterwards forced to contradict.[2] His negative enthusiasms, especially when concerned with a writer for whom his conservatism does not demand deep acknowledgment, is no less conspicuous. Beginning with the declaration, "Skelton was an exceptional blossom of autumn," he continues:

> A long and dreary winter follows. Surrey . . . is to some extent another exception . . . but he has no mastery of verse, nor any elegance of diction. We

[1] *Works*, ii., 171 ff.

[2] *E. g.*, cf. *Works*, iii., 92, with *ibid.*, ii., 244; *Works*, iii., 36, with *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 114, etc.

have Gascoigne, Surrey, Wyatt, stiff, pedantic, artificial, systematic as a country cemetery, and, worst of all, the whole time desperately in love . . . They are said to have refined our language. Let us devoutly hope they did, for it would be pleasant to be grateful to them for something,[1]

and so on.

Lowell was to a considerable extent a creature of moods; their influence at times betrays itself in his essays. The eighteenth century is not a favorite with him but in *Gray*[2] he writes: "As one grows older, one finds more points of half-reluctant sympathy with that undyspeptic and rather worldly period." He goes on praising its

cheerfulness and contentment with things as they were . . . If there was discontent, it was in the individual, and not in the air . . . Post and telegraph were not so importunate as now . . . Manners occupied more time and were allowed more space.

Finally after nearly three pages of laudation, he confesses: "This, no doubt, is the view of a special mood, but it is a mood that grows upon us the longer we have stood upon our lees." This "view of a special mood" was beyond question not in-

[1] *Works*, iv., 274. It was Poe who wrote of Lowell, "He must be a fanatic in whatever circumstances you place him." Poe's *Works*, vi., 240.

[2] *Latest Literary Essays.*

frequent with Lowell. It never, one may believe, interferes with his final pronouncements on a classic author to whom he devotes an essay, but it sometimes affects the tone with which he discusses single qualities. Is he weary of what he regards as the morbid egotism of his own day? Then he must laud Shakespeare's serene restraint which kept him from talking of himself,[1] or Dryden's quality of "blowing the mind clear."[2] Is he tired from over-reading? Then Wordsworth "wrote too much to write always well," though his product is by no means notably large. These moods he allows to affect him even more in the case of less important writers. Fagged out with long reading, his mood is obvious in his attack on Gower:

> Love, beauty, passion, nature, art, life, the natural and theological virtues,—there is nothing beyond his power to disenchant, nothing out of which the tremendous hydraulic press of his allegory . . . will not squeeze all feeling and freshness and leave it a juiceless pulp.[3]

Angry at British editors, he brands Halliwell's *Marston* as "the worst edition we ever saw of any author."[4] This until he comes to another editor

[1] *Works*, iii., 94.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 189. "To look at all sides, and to distrust the verdict of a single mood, is, no doubt, the duty of a critic." *Works*, iii., 114.

[3] *Ibid.*, iii., 330.

[4] *Ibid.*, i., 272.

in the same series, and then, "Of all Mr. Smith's editors, Mr. W. Carew Hazlitt is the worst."[1]

The secret of Lowell, however, does not end with mood or enthusiasm; going even deeper, it does not end with conservatism. In a letter of December 15, 1849, Fredrika Bremer wrote of Lowell and his wife:

> Her mind has more philosophical depth than his. . . . He seemed to me occasionally to be brilliant, witty, gay, especially in the evening, when he has what he calls his "evening fever," when his talk is like an incessant play of fireworks.[2]

Lack of philosophical depth. The weakness which Miss Bremer discovered is worthy of an examination. If it proves to be true it will make many things clear.

It has already been pointed out that Lowell failed to get to the heart of things and of men. The subject is worth further scrutiny. Complex characters eluded him. One feels a certain satisfaction in his study of such men as Lessing with his "simple manhood,"[3] and of Landor, fragmentary though it is, for in them were no subtleties to

[1] *Works*, i., 304.

[2] *Homes of the New World*, i., 134. Lowell wrote of Miss Bremer: "She is one of the most beautiful persons I have ever known—so clear, so simple, so right-minded and -hearted, and so full of judgment." *Letters* i., 174. The last four words are worth noting.

[3] *Works*, ii., 172.

baffle him. But Thoreau he cannot understand; he is too complex. The critic accuses him of sentimentalism, but still the Concord recluse defies his analysis. Rousseau, "many ways a complex character," lies beyond him, and Carlyle equally, of whom he writes in 1884: "I find . . . him more problematic than ever."[1] He wrote on Lessing but passed by Goethe, whose figure "is grand, is rightfully preëminent," but who "to make a study . . . would soil the maiden petals of a woman's soul."[2] He has "the best possible Swift in his head," but his review of Forster's *Swift* in the *Nation* is evidence that the great Dean, "generous miser; skeptical believer; devout scoffer; tender-hearted misanthrope,"[3] lay quite beyond the reach of the critic's psychological insight. Sometimes he gives up in frank despair as in the case of Rousseau.[4] Again, as in treating of Dante, he would simplify the character by denying certain phases which tended to make it complex. The lover of Beatrice never gave himself up to the gratification of sense; the portrayer of Francesca and her lover could not be vindictive. Even in treating men less difficult, it has been pointed out that he never gets to the radical explanation of their qualities.[5] He always leaves a substratum untouched, whose presence he may

[1] *Letters*, ii., 282. [2] *Works*, ii., 172; 194.
[3] *Nation*, vol. xxii; April 13, April 20, 1876.
[4] *Works*, ii., 262. [5] *Vide ante*, Chap. V.

at times have guessed, but to which he could not penetrate. One begins to understand why Lowell did not attempt the method of Sainte-Beuve.

Lowell's essays, studied as wholes, betray a weakness which shows itself in many ways.[1] He once attempted a novel but abandoned it. His comment is significant: "As for the *novel*, in the first place I can't write one nor conceive how any one else can." Consecuity of thought was not a strong point with Lowell. Paragraphs frequently follow one another without any inter-relation save that of dealing with the same author. This is sometimes true of sentences in the same paragraph. The following is typical of such inconsecuity. Speaking of the quarrel between Pope and Addison and the former's explanation of the cause, Lowell says:

> Let any one ask himself how he likes an author's emendations of any poem to which his ear had adapted itself in its former shape, and he will hardly think it needful to charge Addison with any mean motive for his conservatism in this matter.

The next sentence runs: "One or two of Pope's letters are so good as to make us regret that he did not oftener don the dressing-gown and slippers

[1] One is reminded of Lowell's own words in another connection: "The essays confuse by the multiplicity of details while they weary by want of continuity." *Works*, iv., 79.

in his correspondence. One in particular, to Lord Burlington, describing a journey,"[1] etc. He constantly returns in his studies to matters he has already considered. In his non-literary essays, he rambles along, finally coming not to a conclusion but to a stop. His literary essays have much of this desultory character. The butterflies of chance allusion proved irresistibly alluring and he never overcame his weakness for giving chase to them. Opening a volume at random, one finds: "So far as all the classicism then attainable was concerned, Shakespeare got it as cheap as Goethe did, who always bought it ready-made." Then follows two-thirds of a page on Goethe's method of obtaining "ready-made classicism."[2] Again, after discussing Chaucer's alleged irregularities of metre, he says: "Enough and more than enough on a question about which it is . . . hard to be patient." But he cannot be content and pursues the topic for nearly three pages further.[3]

It is beyond doubt that some of the blemishes of Lowell's essays are due to re-working of old material, but not so the weaknesses in his logic. Discussing the question whether Rousseau were a self-deluded *poseur*, he asks: "Have we any right to judge this man after our blunt English fashion . . .? Is French reality precisely our reality?

[1] *Works*, iv., 53. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 46.

[3] *Ibid.*, iii., 348. Of Lowell's mind one recalls Lamb's words in another connection: "Its motion is circular, not progressive."

Could we tolerate tragedy in rhymed alexandrines, instead of blank verse?"[1] The want of parity between tolerating a pose which affects even the sphere of moral action and tolerating a type of verse, is obvious. He comes to the defense of Rousseau by attacking those who had borne testimony against him. Even though Burke were a "snob,"[2] Johnson an intimate of Savage, and Moore "the *ci-devant* friend of the Prince Regent," Rousseau, one would think, remained no better nor worse for that. In discussing the Anglo-Saxon, Lowell sets out to examine his qualities, but shifts to a depiction of the modern Englishman.[3] Doctor Johnson and John Bunyan, after centuries of Norman admixture, are not Cynewulf and Ælfric. Speaking of the Elizabethan dramatists, he says: "How little they were truly dramatic seems proved by the fact that none, or next to none, of their plays have held the stage."[4] It was not unfortunate that "seems" provided the critic with a loophole of escape from the strict implication of his statement. When he sums up Pope, the question at issue is this: Was Pope a poet? Suddenly in Lowell's resumé the question has become, not was Pope a poet, but was he a *great*

[1] *Works*, ii., 268.

[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 236. Cf. *Letters*, ii., 421: "The only feeling . . . in my memory concerning . . . [De Quincey] is that he was a kind of inspired *cad.*"

[3] *Works*, iii., 316.

[4] *Old English Dramatists*, p. 24.

poet? The implication in the question as thus put assumes the very point at issue.[1]

The inexactness of Lowell's thought appears at times in his tendency to employ a word in some unexplained signification of his own or in his limitation of it to his own definition. He tells us that Shakespeare's method "was thoroughly Greek,"[2] although Greek in what sense he fails to say. When he declares: "A rooted discontent seems always to underlie all great poetry, if it be not even the motive of it," he leaves us to guess at his definition of "discontent" or to go back to his source for its meaning.[3] When he calls Burke a sentimentalist, he defines the term to mean "a man who took what would now be called an æsthetic view of morals and politics."[4] Montaigne he regards as "really the first great modern writer,"[5] "modern writer" meaning "the first who assimilated his Greek and Latin, and showed that an author might be original and charming, even classical, if he did not try too hard."[5] Such usage of a term in a special and sometimes undefined signification is no less confusing because one reads in Lowell's letters: "It fags me to deal with particu-

[1] Said Lowell of Dryden: He "sees . . . that a man who undertakes to write should first have a meaning perfectly defined to himself and then should be able to set it forth clearly in the best words."

[2] *Works*, iii., 92.

[3] *Vide* Hazlitt's *Works*, v., 3.

[4] *Works*, ii., 233.

[5] *Ibid.*, ii., 221. Cf. "Dante is . . . the founder of modern literature," *ibid.*, iv., 229.

lars." Such a declaration is a confession, not a defense. Speaking of Wordsworth, Lowell asks:

> How much of his poetry is likely to be a permanent possession? The answer to this question is involved in the answer to a question of wider bearing,—What are the conditions of permanence? Immediate or contemporaneous recognition is certainly not dominant among them . . . Nor can mere originality assure the interest of posterity . . . Since Virgil there have been at most but four cosmopolitan authors. . . . These have stood the supreme test of being translated into all tongues, because the large humanity of their theme, and of their handling of it, needed translation into none.[1]

The matter in Lowell's hands, instead of being simplified, becomes steadily more complex. We ask again: How much of Wordsworth's poetry is likely to be a permanent possession? What are we to understand by "permanent"? Does the critic mean cosmopolitan permanence or national permanence? On the meaning of the latter term depends the answer to the original question. Lowell seems for a moment to consider the bearing of recognition and originality upon it, suddenly shifts the point from national to cosmopolitan permanence, and then leaves the question he has raised hanging in the air with an inadequate answer

[1] *Works*, vi., 107 ff.

to one phase of it, and that not the phase which bears on the case.[1]

Akin to the weakness which has just been discussed, is the critic's lack of precision. His tendency to grope for the exact expression of an idea means not a paucity in vocabulary but a vagueness in thought. That incisive quality of mind which seizes upon the inevitable word, is evident only in flashes. Face to face with an idea which requires precision of thought and consequent precision of phrase, he handles it in the large, expanding or shifting it till its nicety is destroyed.[2] This lack of precision has to some extent already been exemplified; it betrays itself in Lowell's tendency to limit a word to a peculiar meaning of his own; in his avoidance of a definition even though such omission leaves his sentences foggy or meaningless; in his shifting of the point of discussion; in his weakness of logic and inconsecuity of thought.[3] As to his habit of enlargement of

[1] This opening up of a question and leaving it hanging in the air is common with Lowell; *e. g., Latest Literary Essays*, p. 150, on the personal equation. This paragraph is an excellent example of Lowell's inconsecuity of thought.

[2] For an excellent example of Lowell's weakness in close reasoning and in precision of thought and expression, *vide Works*, iv., 261, "No doubt it is primarily," etc.

[3] "Without clearness and terseness," says Lowell, "there can be no good writing whether in prose or verse." *Works*, iv., 55. Again: "Precision of phrase presupposes lucidity of thought." *Ibid.*, iv., 55.

phrase and shifting of the exact idea, the following is typical:

> Bonstetten tells us that "every sensation in Gray was passionate," but I very much doubt *whether he was capable of that sustained passion of the mind which is fed by a prevailing imagination acting on the consciousness of great powers.*[1]

One cannot fail to perceive the hiatus between Bonstetten's idea and the idea as one finds it in Lowell's phrasing. Speaking of Fielding he says: "His imagination was of that secondary order . . . subdued to what it worked in; and his creative power is not less in degree than that of more purely ideal artists, but was different in kind, or, if not, is made to seem so by the more vulgar substance in which it wrought." The attempt at shading the thought becomes irksome and overnice for the critic to handle; he engulfs it in this ample phrasing: "Certainly Fielding's genius was incapable of that *ecstasy of conception through which the poetic imagination seems fused into a molten unity with its material*," and so on.[2] *Aut Cæsar aut nihil!* This phase of Lowell's lack of precision is evident when he sets one writer over against others for the comparison of style. Writing of Milton's blank

[1] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 16. The italics are mine.

[2] *Works*, vi., 55. For an excellent example of this largeness of phrase carried into a discussion, which in turn keeps beside the point, *vide Old English Dramatists*, p. 79 ff.

verse, with its "variety of pause" and "majestic harmony," he says:

> Landor, who, like Milton, seems to have thought in Latin, has caught somewhat more than others of the dignity of his gait, but without his length of stride. Wordsworth, at his finest, has perhaps approached it, but with how long an interval! Bryant has not seldom attained to its serene equanimity, but never emulates its pomp. Keats has caught something of its large utterance, but altogether fails of its nervous severity of phrase.[1]

In the hands of a man of precision of mind, this method of cross-comparison may have certain advantages; in the hands of Lowell it has few or none. For to set men into juxtaposition who offer only imperfect grounds for comparison is to run the risk of giving a false impression of both unless the treatment is of the nicest. To this same lack of precision of mind must be traced his betrayal into superlatives, although the immediate causes of that betrayal were his over-enthusiasm and perhaps a well-grounded suspicion that the principles adduced to support his conclusions were inadequate.

Further light on Lowell's type of mind is not wanting. His conceptions of matters at all abstract were vague, and his application of what

[1] *Works*, iv., 86. Cf. *ibid.*, ii., 114; iii., 129 ff. *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 4.

he regarded as fundamental ideas broke down in the face of varying conditions. He defines form as "the artistic sense of decorum controlling the coördination of parts and ensuring their harmonious subservience to a common end."[1] Style is something different, "a lower form of the same faculty or quality whichever it be"; it "has to do with the perfection of the parts themselves."[2] He is uncertain whether style is a faculty or a quality; but imagination "is the faculty that shapes, gives unity of design and balanced gravitation of parts."[3] Rhythm "shapes both matter and manner to harmonious proportion."[4] "Reach of mind . . . selects, arranges, combines, rejects, denies itself the cheap triumph of immediate effects, because it is absorbed by the controlling charm of proportion and unity."[5] Taste is "a true sense of proportion."[6] Style again "consists mainly in the absence of undue emphasis and exaggeration."[7] Again it is "that exquisite something . . . which . . . makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself, and masters us at last with a sense of indefinable completeness."[8] Again it is "the establishment of a perfect mutual understanding between the worker and his ma-

[1] Precision, says Lowell, comes of insight. *Old English Dramatists*, page 56.

[2] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 144.

[3] *Works*, iii., 30. [4] *Ibid.*, ii., 117. [5] *Ibid.*, iii., 332.

[6] *Ibid.*, iii., 317. [7] *Ibid.*, iii., 353. [8] *Ibid.*, iii., 31.

terial."[1] Such a confusing medley of meanings suggests Lowell's inability to get at the ultimate and his consequent weakness for improvising definitions to fit any particular case which might arise.

In *Shakespeare*, Lowell attempts to work out the *Tempest* as an allegory: Prospero is the Imagination, Ariel is the Fancy, Caliban is "the brute Understanding," who, "the moment his poor wits are warmed with the glorious liquor of Stephano, plots rebellion against his natural lord, the higher Reason." Miranda is "abstract Womanhood"; "Ferdinand is Youth." His allegory gets no further. One may suspect that the difficulty of accounting for Womanhood as the daughter of Imagination, of identifying the higher Reason with the Imagination, and the like, may have baffled him. His inconsistencies and contradictions, indeed, are constantly occurring; the reason is the same. His notions about Nature and the interactions of sympathy between her and man are vague and contradictory. He points out as a weakness in others an attitude of mind which he confesses to in himself.[2] He adopts Carlyle's famous definition of history[3] only to deny its soundness.[4] And so one might go on.

It has already been pointed out that a funda-

[1] *Works*, iii., 37 ff.
[2] Cf. *Works*, ii., 266; i., 376; *Letters*, ii., 66, 424; *ibid.*, i., 366.
[3] *Ibid.*, vi., 91; ii., 284. [4] *Ibid.*, ii., 99.

mental idea of Lowell's was that of moral character as a necessity for a great poet; that this idea expanded till he declared character to be "the only soil in which real mental power can root itself and find sustenance."[1] But difficulties beset him. What of Goethe and Burns and Byron and Rousseau, to name no others? He answers: "Shakespeare, Goethe, Burns,—what have their biographies to do with us? Genius is not a question of character."[2] The man and the genius are different beings.[3] "We forgive everything to the genius; we are inexorable to the man."[2] For "There is nothing so true, so sincere, so downright and forthright, as genius. It is always truer than the man himself is, greater than he."[4] What becomes of character as the only soil in which real mental power can root itself and find sustenance? What becomes of the critic's declaration that "for good or evil, the character and its intellectual product are inextricably interfused?"[5] Rousseau the man, he insists, is not to be considered in connection with Rousseau the genius.[6] But soon the critic changes his mind; we *are* justified in examining Rousseau's character, for he

[1] *Works*, ii., 195. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 241.

[3] "The poet and the man are two different natures; though they exist together, they may be unconscious of each other, and be incapable of deciding on each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act." Letter of Shelley to Mr. and Mrs. Gisborne, July 19, 1821. [4] Lowell's *Works*, ii., 244.

[5] *Ibid.*, iii., 271. [6] *Ibid.*, ii., 240 ff.

is a professed moralist.[1] Then we shall not forgive everything to the genius? No, answers the critic, for in natures incapable of escaping from themselves, "the author is inevitably mixed with his work, and we have a feeling that the amount of his sterling character is the security for the notes he issues."[2] Then genius may be a question of character? Yes, answers the critic, except in the single case of the "highest creative genius . . . for there the thing produced is altogether disengaged from the producer."[2] Who is to be numbered among the highest creative geniuses? We are not told. Let it be assumed that Shakespeare is one of that high company; let it be assumed either that character is the only soil in which real mental power can root itself and find sustenance, or that character is quite apart from genius. What of Shakespeare then? The critic rates the poet's genius so high as to make it a confirmation of a creative Deity,[3] but rates his character "higher even than . . . [his] genius."[4] Perhaps after all the critic was right when he suggested that character was a nobler form of genius.[5] But one remembers that genius is "always truer than the man himself is, greater than he."[6] How does the critic support this last assertion? By demanding to know whether Shakespeare's contemporaries would have "left us so wholly without record of

[1] *Works*, ii., 241 and 243. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 257. [3] *Ibid.*, iii., 93.
[4] *Ibid.*, iii., 94. [5] *Ibid.*, ii., 171. [6] *Ibid.*, ii., 244.

him as they have done," if he as a man "had been as marvellous a creature as the genius that wrote his plays?"[1] Nine months later Lowell has changed his mind and reversed the answer to his own question.[2] What was before a reason for depreciating Shakespeare's character becomes a reason for exalting it. Shakespeare, says Lowell, was wonderfully exceptional because of "his utterly unimpeachable judgment, and that poise of character which enabled him to be at once the greatest of poets and so unnoticeable a good citizen as to leave no incidents for biography."[3] But why go on? In small as in great things it is the same: vagueness of thought, largeness of expression, failure to meet a difficulty fairly, weakness for avoiding or shifting or missing the point at issue, inability to answer difficulties without raising new contradictions, the contradictions left unreconciled because unreconcilable except to a philosophic mind. To say that Lowell never took the trouble to bring his contradictory statements into harmony is to assume the real point, which is: Was it possible for Lowell to bring his contradictions—when they went at all deep—into harmony? The

[1] *Works*, ii., 244.

[2] In *Shakespeare*, in *North American Review*, April, 1868.

[3] *Works*, iii., 92. For a typical example of Lowell's vagueness of thought and expression, *vide Works*, iv., 261, "No doubt it is primarily," etc. Cf. *Letters*, i., 357: "You see what I mean—or, at any rate, that I have a meaning, which is the main thing."

unity which lies at the root of variety was precisely what presented difficulties to Lowell. It was pointed out earlier that his enthusiasm led him to express views on character and genius which tended to exalt that author who was the subject of his immediate study. Lowell's enthusiasm would never have been allowed so to dominate him, had he possessed philosophic depth of mind.

One begins to understand why the law, with its demands of penetration to basic principles, of exactness in conception and expression, of consecuity of thought and of logical reasoning, should not have appealed to Lowell. Small wonder that he wrote: It is a calling "which I hate and for which I am not *well* fitted to say the least."[1]

Such comments as this upon himself are frequent in Lowell. It would be to demand of him that quality of mind which he did not possess were one to expect him to suggest the ultimate source of his own weaknesses. Many of these weaknesses he saw in other writers.[2] What he says of himself has a particular interest; it points the way to a confirmation of our contention. Here is the man of feeling, whose early conceptions of a work to be

[1] *Letters*, i., 66.

[2] For example, he says of Milton: "He was far more rhetorician than thinker." (*Works*, iv., 84.) Of Richter: "Delightful as Jean Paul's humor is, how much more so would it be if he only knew when to stop." Lowell did not take kindly to criticism from others. Cf. *Letters*, i., 121; *ibid.*, ii., 65 ff.; Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, p. 224.

written are vague and luminous in the warm haze of first imaginings: "The germ of a poem . . . is always delightful to me, but I have no pleasure in working it up."[1] Here is the man of feeling again: "One of my great defects . . . is an impatience of mind which makes me contemptuously indifferent about arguing matters that have once become convictions."[1] One gets new light on this impatience of mind if one recalls another admission of Lowell's, "It fags me to deal with particulars."[2] There is the man of feeling again, whose ideas are in the large, because the result of impression, and never crystallized by contact with the touchstone of ultimate principles. It is worth while to listen to these self-revelations; they help to establish our contention. Lowell says in one of his letters: "I must see the full face [of truth] and then the two sides have such different expressions that I begin to doubt which is the sincere and cannot surrender myself."[3] In the *Cathedral*, he speaks of those

"Who see two sides, with our posed selves debate."

How often the "two sides" belonged to one and the same truth, if only he had been able to perceive it! That "uniformity in variety," which, as Professor Beers says, "it is for . . . the philosopher to detect,"[4] lay beyond Lowell's powers to

[1] *Letters*, ii., 10.
[2] *Ibid.*, i., 134.
[3] *Ibid.*, ii., 280.
[4] *Points at Issue*, p. 115.

perceive. He never seems to have realized the significance of this weakness.

He wrote in 1875: "I am one of the last . . . of the great readers," and he confesses to being "rather an unwilling writer."[1] With all his wide reading, how much real thinking did Lowell do? Did he have his eyes turned inward upon himself when he wrote: "It is curious . . . how tyrannical the habit of reading is, and what shifts we make to escape thinking. There is no bore we dread being left alone with so much as our own minds."[2] Did he find his own mind a bore with which he dreaded to be left alone? He writes in a letter of December, 1884: "Every now and then my good spirits carry me away and people find me amusing, but reaction always sets in the moment I am left to myself."[3] We are not without illuminating commentaries on this. Fifteen months later, writing of Gray,[4] he says: "He was cheerful . . . in any company but his own, and this, it may be guessed, because faculties were called into play which he had not the innate force to rouse into more profitable activity." To what was due this lack of innate force? Lowell answers, indolence, "intellectual indolence." One need not stop to consider whether or not Lowell's diagnosis of Gray is sound. One's interest in it is

[1] *Letters*, ii., 154. [2] *Works*, i., 21. [3] *Letters*, ii., 289.
[4] *New Princeton Review* for March, 1886, now in *Latest Literary Essays*.

keen, not for what it tries to tell us about Gray, but for what it actually does tell us about Lowell. Beyond doubt the critic thought he read in the poet symptoms which he found in himself. He discovers that Gray like himself is cheerful only in company; he decides that Gray's "constant endeavor was to occupy himself in whatever would save him from the reflection of how he might occupy himself better." Was it for a similar reason that Lowell read omnivorously, but wrote unwillingly?[1] Was he eager to escape what would demand thought? "I always write my longest letters," he says, "when I have something else to do. *It seems so like being industrious.*"[2] Howells tells us: "Lowell liked to have some one help him idle the time away and keep him as long as possible from his work." The critic offers in explanation of Gray the weakness which he thinks explains himself. He writes: "I have never been able to shake off the indolence (I do not know whether to call it intellectual or physical) that I inherited from my father."[3] One does not find that physical indolence is the term to apply to this man Lowell who enjoys the experiences of the *Moosehead Journal*, who likes frequent and long tramps in the open, who goes on vacation trips to

[1] Cf. *Letters*, ii., 154.

[2] *Ibid.*, ii., 346. The italics are mine. Cf. *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 20: Lowell was thinking of himself when he wrote: "Nobody knew better than Johnson what a master of casuistry is indolence."

[3] *Letters*, ii., 280.

the Adirondacks and finds delight in the free life of the woods. Lowell gives us the key to the answer in his own case when he expresses the belief that Gray's indolence was intellectual. He finds that Gray was melancholy in his own company just as he was himself.[1] And why? "Gray's melancholy was that of Richard II.:—

"I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,
For now hath time made me his numbering clock."

Here again Lowell thinks he finds in Gray the same symptoms as in his own case and suggests a similar explanation,—something akin to remorse. "I have thrown away hours enough to make a handsome reputation out of," Lowell wrote in 1876. Again he speaks of the time when "I am in Mount Auburn, with so much undone that I might have done."[2] And still again: "I feel that my life has been mainly wasted—that I have thrown away more than most men ever had," but he was never able, he says, to shake off indolence. Thus one gets back to indolence again; but one is not in the throes of a vicious circle; the explanation is not far to seek. Lowell was a man of feeling, not a man of thought; he read enormously and found in reading a threefold satisfaction: his impressionism was sated; thought was cheated into a semblance of real activity by following the course of another's mind; it seemed, to use his own

[1] *Letters*, ii., 289. [2] *Ibid.*, ii., 215.

words in another connection, "so much like being industrious." Conceptions of poems and essays fell short in the reality.[1] He came to realize that something was lacking in his work. And with the passing years was born a dissatisfaction, not alone, one may believe, with the amount of his writings, for the amount was not small. He "has lived so long and done so little."[2] His feeling of dissatisfaction with his life and of something akin to remorse for his supposed sins of omission sprang not from a moment's mood of depression, but from the consciousness of a fatal defect in himself which robbed his accomplishment of its best vitality. It was characteristic of Lowell that in tracing this defect he got no further than his indolence, one may say his intellectual indolence.

An outgrowth of that infirmity was doubtless the dependence on stimuli outside of himself which was so marked in Lowell's case and which has

[1] "The conception of the verses [*The Flying Dutchman*] is good; the verses are bad . . . As for putting back what was in the first copy—the said first copy went up my chimney Sunday afternoon, as airy and sparkling a poem as I meant it to be when it came first into my head. If I *could* recover it with the fervor of the flame and the grace of the smoke still in it! That's the kind of thing we dream of—the copy you have is the kind of thing we *do*." *Letters*, i., 397 ff. Cf. *ibid.*, i., 345 ff; ii., 10. "'I have the best possible Swift in my head if I could only get him out.' . . . Apparently he had planned a paper on Swift of the proportions of one of his *North American* articles; what actually appeared was a brief review of Forster's *Life of Swift* in the *Nation*." Scudder, ii., 198. Cf. *Letters*, ii., 166 ff.

[2] *Letters*, ii., 367.

already been discussed. But to say that the secret of the critic's shortcomings is found in intellectual indolence, is to shut one's eyes to the real significance of the weaknesses which have already been pointed out; it is, in a word, to stop short of the fundamental explanation. "All thought is sad,"[1] said Lowell, and in so far as he spoke for himself he was right. It is sad when it is something we make shift to escape from; it is sad when it brings us no nearer a radical truth than its seemingly contradictory facets; it is sad finally to that man with whom penetration is an occasional moment's flash of insight and not a quality of mind. Behind Lowell's intellectual indolence lay his real weakness: lack of philosophic depth of mind. To that lack is to be attributed the absence of genuine vitality in his critical essays. Remembering this, we find that Lowell's feelings of a wasted life are explicable. It is fair to believe that he suspected, perhaps even realized, that he had failed to penetrate to the heart of his subject; that his work in consequence, when judged by what he had hoped to achieve and by the criticism of admitted masters, was tried and found wanting. What he did not realize, perhaps not even suspect, was that the deficiency of his essays had root in a deficiency of his type of mind. An examination of Lowell's critical method will not contradict this contention.

[1] *Poetical Works*, iv., 61.

CHAPTER VII

LOWELL: THE CRITIC AND HIS CRITICISM

LOWELL'S early critical works have already been discussed. They are worth bearing in mind as eminently characteristic of the mature Lowell. They are discursive, generally vague when the question at issue becomes abstruse, and abound in purple patches. The qualities of the poets discussed are set down without any endeavor to mark their inter-relation or to trace them back to any radical characteristic. Poems are regarded from the standpoint of their effect on the reader, and that effect is translated into figurative language. In his *Lectures on the English Poets*, Lowell followed the same method. He translated his impressions into simile and metaphor. He never got at the ultimate answer to a difficult question. In his first lecture he said: "The lecturer on science has only to show how much he knows—the lecturer on poetry can only be sure how much he feels." Here is the secret of Lowell's critical method. However uncertain he might be about penetrating to ultimate principles, he was sure of

the feelings which a poem aroused in him. His method in consequence was essentially subjective, because, after all, only a matter of impression. When he pointed out the various qualities of an author, he was still making use of his impressions, as in that clever *jeu d'esprit, A Fable for Critics*. Such a work as the *Fable* was peculiarly suitable to a man of Lowell's type of mind. For in it he was not restrained by that conservatism which was bound to accept a classic with deference, nor by those particulars with which it fagged him to deal, nor by the necessity of appealing to the principles of judgment in literature. He could give a brilliant exhibition of critical pyrotechnics, and he did. But critical pyrotechnics is not criticism. Lowell came to realize this and in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, he tried to be better than his creed. For he did not altogether content himself with his impressions about poets and their poetry. His attempts at penetrating to ultimate principles were hardly successful or satisfying,[1] but they showed a tendency in the right direction. Lowell was coming to realize that criticism, to possess vitality, must go deeper than the mere impressions of the critic.

By the time he came to maturity in his critical essays, he could write:

Unless we admit certain principles as fixed beyond

[1] *E.g.*, chap. i., called Definitions.

question, we shall be able to render no adequate judgment, but only to record our impressions, which may be valuable or not, according to the greater or less ductility of the senses on which they are made.[1]

This need not lead one astray; Lowell remained an impressionist. He reads a work through, making marginal notes as he goes along, realizes a total impression and then sets to work. In his typical essays he presents this total impression, then the tale of his author's separate qualities, then his total impression again as a summary. This procedure explains in some degree the frequent inconsequence of his summary, which rarely is warranted in any strict sense by the array of qualities adduced. He is not blind to this himself. He reads Dryden, gets his total impression, which as usual seems broader than the aggregation of qualities would warrant, and confesses: "You *feel* that the whole of him was better than any random specimens, though of his best, seem to prove."[2] He tries hard to give warrant to his general impression, but finally contents himself with an emphatic reaffirmation of it. "It is hard," he says in *Gray*, "to justify a general impression by conclusive examples. Two instances will serve to point my meaning, if not wholly to justify my generalization."[3] His atti-

[1] *Works*, iii., 29, written in 1868.
[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 103. The italics are mine.
[3] *Latest Literary Essays*, p. 4.

tude as an impressionist is evident in occasional statements of his own: He has "read through his (Thoreau's) six volumes in the order of their production." He continues: "I shall try to give an adequate report of their impression upon me both as critic and as *mere reader*."[1] In his summary of Spenser he quotes three of the poet's striking lines, prefacing his selection by the statement that they "best characterize the *feeling* his poetry gives us."[2]

Not being content merely with appreciation, Lowell, as has been suggested, made various endeavors to go deeper; it was when he attempted "to give a reason for the faith that was in him" that his failure was most marked. His inability to handle at all adequately difficult or abstract questions has already been referred to. They bear out the point that Lowell was a man of feeling rather than of thought. For they retreat from the definite and specific and concrete into the large and figurative and vague. Speaking of Shakespeare, to cite here but one new example, Lowell says: His "moral is the moral of worldly wisdom only heightened to the level of his wide-viewing mind, and made typical by the dramatic

[1] *Works*, i., 369. The italics are mine.

[2] *Ibid.*, iv., 352. The italics are mine. Cf. "In gathering up the impressions made upon us by Mr. Masson's work," etc. (*Works*, iv., 86); also "I find a confirmation of this feeling about Dryden," etc. (*Works*, iii., 123).

energy of his plastic nature."[1] One is tempted to say of this as De Quincey said of Pope: His "language does not realize the idea; it simply suggests or hints it." The following passage, though rather lengthy, is worth quoting. It is typical and will repay analysis as indicative of several weaknesses in Lowell which have already been discussed. He has used the phrase "imaginative unity," and now says:

> The true ideal is not opposed to the real, nor is it any artificial heightening thereof, but lies *in* it, and blessed are the eyes that find it! It is the *mens divinior* which hides within the actual, transfiguring matter-of-fact into matter-of-meaning for him who has the gift of second-sight. In this sense Hogarth is often more truly ideal than Raphael, Shakespeare often more truly so than the Greeks. I think it is a more or less conscious perception of this ideality, as it is a more or less well-grounded persuasion of it as respects the Greeks, that assures to him as to them, and with equal justice, a permanent supremacy over the minds of men. This gives to his characters their universality, to his thought its irradiating property, while the artistic purpose running through and combining the endless variety of scene and character will alone account for his power of dramatic effect.[2]

How far does all this penetrate through the

[1] *Works*, iii., 324.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii., 66. Cf. also *ibid.*, ii., 79, 99; iv., 284; iii., 92, etc.

mist of words into the realm of ideas? To use Matthew Arnold's words in another connection, they "carry us really not a step farther than the proposition which they would interpret." It is not easy to bring oneself to examine such passages of Lowell from a coldly analytic point of view. He has such a generous flow of language that one is inclined to accept his words as surcharged with meaning. On submitting them to examination one seems to hear him say, "You see what I mean —or, at any rate, that I have a meaning, which is the main thing." De Quincey's words on Pope come to mind again, "His language does not realize the idea." This is but another phase of that weakness which runs through all Lowell's critical essays and which "keeps him amid symbolism and illusion and the fringes of things." We face here the same question which constantly confronts us: What was this weakness? And always one answer remains.

In saying that Lowell was an impressionist, one need not deny that he had certain definite ideas about poetry. Three he adhered to: poetry must be interesting[1]; it must possess the power of imaginative appeal[2]; it must have finish of expression or verbal style.[3] So far as Lowell

[1] *Works*, ii., 142. Cf. also *ibid.*, ii., 134; *Old English Dramatists*, pp. 19 and 20. [2] Cf. *Ibid.*, iii., 31, 32, 35; iv., 267.

[3] Cf. *Ibid.*, iii., 15, 46, 335; iv., 308; vi., 107; *Old English Dramatists*, p. 106.

applied these criteria at all, it was with no certainty of method. *Merope* is impossible because dull.[1] Most of Wordsworth's poetry will perish because it lacks style.[2] No poetry possesses true vitality which does not "leap throbbing at touch of that shaping faculty, the imagination."[3] For the most part, however, Lowell relies upon the soundness of his impression to assure him that a work is excellent. That impression he then casts about to justify. That this is his procedure is evident in general from a study of his essays and in particular from his tendency to shift his emphasis from one poetical quality to another. In his essay on Spenser, the "epicure of language," he emphasizes diction to the point where he confesses that he lays himself open to the charge of over-stressing this single attribute.[4] In his essay on Shakespeare whose "imagination is wonderful" he declares that the "power of expression is subsidiary, and goes only a little way toward the making of a great poet."[5] Calderon, he declares, is "one of the most marvellous of poets,"[6] indeed "a greater poet than Goethe,"[7] but yet he cannot

[1] *Works*, ii., 134. [2] *Ibid.*, iii., 35. [3] *Ibid.*, iv., 267.
[4] *Ibid.*, iv., 308. Cf. also iii., 335; vi., 107; *Old English Dramatists*, p. 106. [5] *Works*, iii., 31.
[6] *Letters*, ii., 149. "I find a striking similarity between *Faust*, and this drama (*Magico Prodigioso*), and if I were to acknowledge Coleridge's distinction, should say Goethe was the greatest philosopher and Calderon the greatest poet." Letter of Shelley to John Gisborne, April 10, 1822. [7] *Works*, vi., 108.

decide whether the Spaniard's gift were imagination or fancy. But what did it matter? He considered Calderon a marvellous poet for all that. His taste told him so; the ultimate reason why did not matter. Whether a poet was great because his work was rich in style or imagination or interest was of only secondary importance to Lowell. The primary consideration with him was his impression; to this he clung, however inadequate or contradictory his reasons in its support.

Before saying the final word, it is worth while to take a glance at Lowell the critic from the viewpoints we have occupied in studying him. He had a wide knowledge, gained from school and college and legal studies, from the demands put upon him in sanctum and classroom, from foreign travel, intimate acquaintance with modern languages, enormous reading, and friendship with men of culture and learning. He was proficient in linguistics and held to illuminating principles regarding the vitality of language. In his knowledge of art and history, and in his sympathy for science and classic art, he was deficient. While towards literature his sympathy was broad enough to include almost all the greater classics of various languages, he was deficient in sympathy for the nineteenth century and regarded the fifteenth throughout Europe as almost a literary desert. His condemnation was evoked by sentimentalism, by the employment in poetry of Greek and medie-

val themes, by modern-day realism. His interest in the drama and the novel was of the slightest. Lowell seems honestly to have tried to preserve a judicial attitude towards the subjects of his critical essays. Towards the greater classics, especially Dante and Shakespeare, his attitude became one of frank encomium. He was subject to enthusiasms which often swept him into over-statements of both praise and blame. When his devotion to an author did not blind him to his defects, he struck a fair balance of justice, not so much by maintaining a coolly impartial attitude as by swinging pendulum-wise between praise and blame. Lowell could never keep the personal equation in subjection. So far as taste belongs to penetration by being that faculty which does not stamp as excellent a piece of literature which is poor, Lowell may be said to have possessed penetration. But his taste in recognizing an excellent piece of literature was not so sound. Considerations which should not have weighed with him made him at times ignore or deny the merit of certain works. In so far as penetration is insight into the mind of an author or his art and into the ultimate principles which stamp him as *sui generis* and explain him, Lowell was wanting. His taste was intuitive. He had to trust it to justify him without the aid of radical principles. *Porro unum est necessarium.* The final gift whose presence, even despite his deficiencies, would

have made him a genuine critic of merit, stamps him by its absence as merely an impressionist. What principles he had, became more or less distorted when he endeavored to apply them; indeed they always had the air of being extemporized for the particular case under discussion. That penetration which goes deep in a moment's flash, Lowell displays on occasions. But the sudden rending of the veil seems as unexpected to him as to the reader. The knowledge which thus suddenly opens to his gaze is not used to illuminate the whole man or his work; the critic seems uncertain how to employ it and the benefit of that swift inner glimpse is lost. It is not unjust to say of Lowell that penetration with him was an occasional gift of such insight as comes at times to most men of imaginative temperament; it was not a quality of mind.

The ultimate secret of Lowell's weakness did not lie, it is reasonable to maintain, in his own power to remedy. It belonged to his type of mind. That precision in detail which a classical training might be supposed to foster and whose importance would be emphasized by the demands upon him as editor and professor, is for the most part wanting. That disregard of the unessential, that closeness of reasoning, that penetration to ultimate principles, all of which a course of legal training would inculcate in a mind receptive to such influence, left no perceptible traces on Lowell.

His course in law seems to have fulfilled no purpose except that of equipping him with legal phrases for figurative use. *Porro unum est necessarium.* Lowell lacked philosophical depth of mind, the one thing so necessary that without it the total of his other endowments was inadequate.

One difficulty remains: if this contention is true, how are we to account for Lowell's high place as a critic? Without going into a history of American criticism, it is fair to say that, with the exception of Lowell, only three critics among his predecessors or contemporaries demand consideration, Poe, Reed, and Whipple. Reed's life ended while he was still a young man. Though his work indeed shows poise and thoughtfulness, he betrays a tendency to value literature for its moral rather than for its æsthetic value. He lacks the buoyancy which went so far to make Lowell readable. Whipple is inclined to be heavy-footed; there is no sparkle in his pages. He has a certainty of tone, born doubtless of his success on the platform, which is not justified by the precariousness of his judgments. Poe deserves a study by himself. He had many of the essential gifts of an excellent critic, but was unfortunate enough to become involved in literary bickerings, and to "give up to party what was meant for mankind." Much of his work was *ephemera critica;* it perished with the writings which evoked it. Lowell entered the field, and with the prestige which

belonged to him as a poet and as the academic successor of Ticknor and Longfellow, wrote of the masters of literature. Something of the buoyancy and verve of the man clung to his work. Here were a wealth of allusion, a heightened rhetoric, a pregnant homeliness of illustration, and yet withal something of the air of the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* domesticated in America. These *critiques* seemed to join the literary traditions of polished old England on the one hand to the eager yearning for culture of crude New England on the other. Here was a critic, it was thought, and a poet and professor as well, who might match lances with the critics over-seas. New England itself, Boston, was the centre of literary America in Lowell's time, and the leaders in its literary ascendancy were his friends. Who was there to undertake the ungracious business of pointing out weaknesses in his critical work?[1] Men who came in direct contact with him seem to have found him brilliant and charming in his mood. It is not hard to believe that the sparkling cleverness of Lowell and the range of allusion made possible by his enormous reading and retentive memory, astonished as well as delighted the men with whom he came closely in contact; that their admiration led them not only to attribute to him a depth of mind which he did not possess, but also perhaps to

[1] Severely critical articles appeared in *Scribner's Monthly*, iv., 75, 227, 339, and in *Lippincott's* for June, 1871.

believe they found evidences of it in his critical essays. To doubt it indeed might well seem heresy. Men of a younger generation, no less than of his own, came to know Lowell on familiar terms and to their writings regarding him rather than to those of his immediate contemporaries, is due the maintenance of the Lowell tradition.

It has been said already that it is not easy to probe into the weaknesses of a critic who has achieved so many quotable phrases. Remembering them one is almost disarmed. But this quotability, what of it? To read the more recent works in which reference is made to Lowell, makes one fact striking: Lowell's dicta are introduced, not because they are surcharged with a pregnancy which makes them an *open sesame* to an author's mind or art; not because they contain a luminous definition which makes the elusive more nearly tangible, or crystallizes what lurks too often in the realm of feeling; not, in a word, for any intrinsic merit they possess as criticism in a high degree, but mainly for their quotability.[1] Quotability does not prove Lowell a great critic any more than it proves Pope a great poet. If it were taken as a test, Lowell might sit next to Coleridge, and Pope to Shakespeare.

[1] "Mere vividness of expression, such as makes quotable passages, comes of the complete surrender of self to the impression, whether spiritual or sensual, of the moment." Lowell's *Works*, iii., 31.

Can Lowell grapple with principles like Coleridge? Or interpret with steady lucidity and consistence like Hazlitt? Or give one that peculiar flash of insight by which Lamb illumined an author not for a moment but abidingly? Can he penetrate a problem in the psychology of literature, like De Quincey in *Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*, or achieve a pregnant distinction, like that between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power? Can he apply a wide-reaching principle of human significance like Carlyle, who by fitting the Johnson-Boswell relation to hero-worship, revolutionized forever the world's opinion of Boswell? Has he given us criteria broad enough for general application, like Arnold in his description of the grand style and his definition of poetry? Has he a command of principles like Hutton, whose ethical and æsthetic notions were not constantly at the grapple? Has he, in a word, given us principles of wide application, which may be applied consistently and which stimulate the reader to expand and to modify them, thus eventually arriving at permanent criteria for himself?

It may be objected that such comparisons and such demands are unfair to Lowell; that one ought to accept him for what he is. It is the purpose of this study to endeavor to appraise him for what he is and candidly to inquire whether he belongs to the ranks of critics. No conclusions which aim

to state the real truth about Lowell are unfair. He has been regarded as a critic; in such a light he seems seriously to have regarded himself. But to assign him such a rank is to do him the injustice of over-estimation. If he would claim kinship with Ulysses, let him prove his metal by bending the hero's bow.

If Lowell is to survive, it must be frankly as an impressionist. For so far as criticism approaches a science, so far as it depends to any serious extent on ultimate principles, so far, in a word, as it is something more fundamental and abiding than the *ipse dixit* of an appreciator, Lowell is not a critic.

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NOTE: An extensive bibliography of articles by Lowell, only some of which have been republished (in the *Round Table*, Boston, 1913), is given in the appendix to Scudder's biography of Lowell.

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